

**Scripted Skins: (th)inking About Women's Spiritually-Inspired
Tattoos as Embodied Life Narratives**

by © Gina D. Snooks

A thesis submitted to the

School of Graduate Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Gender Studies/Department of Gender Studies

Memorial University of Newfoundland

October 2015

St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador

Abstract

Theorizing the body as a space where subjectivity is materialized, in this thesis, I examine women's spiritually-inspired tattoos as embodied life narratives. Broadly speaking, a primary goal of my research is to better understand ways in which women experience spirituality. More precisely, I am interested in the ways in which women enact experiences of contemporary spirituality through voluntary tattooing practices.

By using a corporeal feminist lens that rejects the Cartesian mind-body dualism (Horner and Keane 1), I propose that some women use the intimate connections that they have with their bodies to express thoughts, beliefs, experiences and their pasts (Arp xiv). By keeping in mind that body art has the potential to narrate experiences of subjectivity (A. Jones 13), my central aim in this thesis is to conceptualize the ways in which inked flesh functions as a space for performative auto/biographical storytelling. Emerging from this, following Amelia Jones, my analysis presumes that body art is neither inherently critical nor inherently reactionary (14). Instead, in this iteration, I propose that tattoos are implicit and explicit expressions of women's lived experiences of spirituality, which are intersubjective and multivalent. Tattoos, therefore, are polysemic narratives enacted contextually. In short, I argue that women's spiritually-inspired tattoos potentially have profound meanings for the bearer which far exceed decoration (Hemingson 10).

Keywords: Tattoos, Spirituality, Life Stories, Performative Storytelling, Embodiment

Acknowledgements

It is with deepest gratitude that I acknowledge the many voices who have contributed to this thesis. I am particularly grateful to the numerous inked people who have kindly shared their tattoo stories with me and have allowed me to share those stories here. Thank-you Dane, Helen, Jaime, Jessica, Karen, Lori, Ruth, Sarah, Scotia, Sheila and Zaren. Thank-you also to the numerous family, friends, colleagues, professors and even strangers who have engaged in this ongoing conversation with me, there is no doubt that their voices have made their way into this thesis. My sincerest gratitude also goes to my colleagues in the Department of Gender Studies who have offered advice all along this journey, many of whom have also generously offered their time proofreading at various stages of this project. On that note, thank-you Grace Myers for reading numerous drafts and for your attention to detail. I acknowledge also the input of Dr. Diane Tye and the students of Folklore Gender (Winter 2014) who provided valuable insight during the initial development of this thesis.

Thank you to Laura Casey of Lady Lo's Custom Tattoos in St. John's, NL for marking my flesh and for reminding me that tattoos are not permanent. A special nod of appreciation goes to my son, Daniel, for gifting me the original image that later became my first tattoo and for the many conversations we have had about inked flesh, and to my young nephew, Malcolm, who inspired me to consider how my butterfly tattoo might differ from my brother's dragon tattoo.

I acknowledge, also, the generous financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for awarding me with a Joseph Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship in 2014, valued at \$17, 500.

Lastly, but certainly not least, special thanks to my co-supervisors Dr. Sonja Boon and Dr. Jennifer Dyer whose guidance, gentle nudges and encouragement have been an integral part of this process; I am honoured for the gift of your wisdom.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Prologue: *My Tattoo Story*

“Did it hurt?” they ask me?

“No,” I say.

“Not at all?”

“No, not at all,” I affirm.

And I would be telling the truth. It didn’t hurt. Well, not physically.

Still, I cried when my tattoo artist put down her needle and brought me a mirror. I cried dry tears that day. And, I shed tears on the day he gifted me the image. Not in his sight, but when the door closed between us — my son and I.

Believe and hope. Words scripted by the pen of my only child. And, etched into my skin.

“It’s beautiful,” some would say.

I’d smile, I like to hear it’s beautiful.

Others would say, “it’s so BIG.”

Then I’d shrug my shoulders.

So what if they think it’s BIG. It’s not their skin — it’s not their story.

Well, it’s kinda their story too, but it’s not their skin.

1.2 Introduction

Since the mid 1960s tattooing practices have undergone a significant shift, leading to what has been called a “tattoo renaissance” (Sanders and Vail 19; Mun et al. 143; Fenske 1) in which bodies in North America are increasingly becoming inked, particularly those of women (Mifflin 6). As a result, tattooing has more and more become a part of mainstream culture. In fact, since the early 1990s Canadian women have undergone the tattoo needle in unprecedented numbers (Atkinson 19). But what really motivates women to offer their flesh to the needles of tattoo artists, I wonder? Are tattoos graffiti for the soul? Does inked flesh express the innermost intimate details of women’s subjectivity?

After all, if you think about it, tattooing is messy business. Needles scratch at the surface of skin — tearing bodies apart — mingling blood and flesh, ink and pus, sweat and tears. Messy business indeed. Sometimes it hurts. Sometimes it hurts a lot. And there's scarring. The surface hardens, much like leather — tough but also pliable. In the end, though, often, something beautiful emerges. And, if you think about it, life is messy business too. Sometimes it hurts. Sometimes you have to be tough and also pliable. But life is also beautiful. This messiness — the pain, the joy, the despair, the hope and the beauty— these are among the many reasons why women become tattooed.

Simply put, tattoos tell stories. Expanding on that, following Robert Arp, I propose that some tattooed women use the intimate connections that they have with their bodies to express their thoughts, beliefs, experiences and their pasts (Arp xiv). Sanders and Vail as well as others similarly argue that tattoos often signify the bearer's personal interests or commitments to particular social groups (Sanders and Vail 2008; DeMello 12). Adding to that, Sonja Modesti proposes that the performance of tattooing can symbolize personal growth, commemorations, individualism, feminist motivations and, particularly important to this discussion, sacredness of the body and spirituality (209). In general, then, I argue that tattoos tell “stories of the relationship of human beings and their bodies,” as Wendy Lynn Lee aptly writes (156). In this thesis, I explore some of those stories. A central aim of my research is to better understand ways in which women experience spirituality and, more specifically, how such experiences are performed through the body art etched into their flesh.

From this starting point, I examine tattoos as emergent, performative, embodied life stories. Theorizing the body as a space where gender difference is materialized, I examine ways

in which personal tattoo narratives are entwined in body politics. To that point, I conceptualize ways in which inked flesh functions as a medium of culture (Bordo 90; Spry 96), whereby women shape and reshape the presentation of their life narratives through tattooing practices. Thus, I make significant theoretical links between ways in which the dissemination of knowledge influences the regulation of identity. Moreover, I postulate that such links are foundational to understanding ways in which subjectivity is performed vis-à-vis cultural, political and social discourses.

Taking Amelia Jones' proposals that "[t]he self is inexorably embodied" (34) and that subjectivity is performed through body art (13) as starting points, I examine women's tattooing practices as Butlerian performative acts that constitute an interplay of memory, experience, identity and agency (Smith and Watson 10). That is to say, my conceptual framework has been shaped by the ideas of feminist and queer theory philosopher Judith Butler, who posits that gender and other identity performances are socially, culturally and politically constructed; and consequently, "performed" through the repetitive enactment of specific gestures and behaviours (Butler xv). In Butlerian terminology this is known as "performativity" theory (Butler xv). Further to that, embodiment, in my usage, is best described by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson who write, "[a]s a textual surface upon which a person's life is inscribed, the body is a site of autobiographical knowledge because memory itself is an embodiment" (10). By this I mean that embodiment is a *process* in constant flux that changes according to one's lived experience (Allegranti 2). Thought of another way, embodiment refers to the tangible and/or visible expressions, ideas, feelings and experiences that are evident upon the flesh and within the body.

Embodied knowledge, therefore, is knowledge gained by paying close attention to our bodies and how our bodies feel when interacting with others in specific contexts (Spry 64; Grosz 86).

I propose, therefore, that tattoos are auto/biographical performances of selfhood created through plural, intersecting identities as well as lived embodied experience. For this reason, I situate my work within the context of auto/biography studies, which understands auto/biography or life writing as a performative telling of the “self” (Smith 108; A. Jones 13) that is multiple, fragmented and in process (Smith and Watson 2012, 9; A. Jones 18; Modesti 10; S. Jones 2012, 56). In doing so, I reject any notion of a “true self” or singular identity that may be enacted through such auto/biographical performances, precisely because, in this usage, embodiment is a process that changes selfhood through lived experience. In a similar way, Sidonie Smith reframes Judith Butler’s notion of performativity to suggest that an auto/biography is not a singular story but consists of many stories enacted contextually (110). Indeed, as Victoria Pitts states, identities “are continually performed and revised through and within embodiment” (84). To think of it another way, “I/we constitute selves in the staged moment of performance,” as Tami Spry proposes (85). Performance, in this context, therefore means the enactment of everyday life, where life is a matter of embodied, multiple, ongoing, and intersubjective acts of existence, however mundane. In this way, I propose that tattoos are a performative form of storytelling that communicates the bearers’ thoughts and ideas about themselves vis-à-vis social, cultural and political locations. Put another way, I am interested in the ways in which skin — as the location of tattooing practices — is actively involved in the mutable and pliable process of women’s subjectivity. To that end, I understand tattooing practices as acts of performative storytelling that are conceptually influenced by a Butlerian understanding of performativity. Furthermore, as I

explore in greater detail in chapter 3, performativity and performance theories are mutually entwined. Tattooed bodies, thus, as Sonja Modesti claims, are spaces whereupon lived experience is theorized and where knowledge about daily living can be detected (Modesti 199).

Notably, my choice to use the terms “auto/biography” and “auto/ethnography” (which I discuss in more detail later) with a dividing mark that articulates the individual terms’ mutual embeddedness in one another aligns with that of Jeanne Perreault and Marlene Kadar, who suggest that auto/biography is a flexible term that implies an interwoven relationship between self and other(s) (Introduction). In this way, experience is made through the embodied intersubjective nature of storytelling (Smith and Watson ch. 2). Auto/biography, in this usage, symbolizes an interconnectedness between self and other or personal and political and, thus, suggests that the lines between such spaces are blurred, as *My Tattoo Story* – which opens this introduction – demonstrates. Simply stated, while *My Tattoo Story* is narrative about myself, the story is not mine alone; rather, it is a tale about myself and others.

1.3 Literature Review

Clearly I am not alone in my fascination of inked bodies; as mentioned above, tattooing practices are becoming a part of mainstream culture more and more. Alongside this growing phenomenon, scholars have developed a vast body of literature on tattooing: Margo DeMello (2000); Clinton R. Sanders and D. Angus Vail (2008); Michael Atkinson (2002); Mindy Fenske (2007); Margot Mifflin (2013); Victoria Pitts (2003) and Robert Arp et al. (2012), just to name a few, have all made significant contributions to contemporary scholarship on tattooing practices and I acknowledge that this thesis draws upon their expertise.

Having said that, what surprises me is Michael Atkinson's assertion that scholarship has neglected to provide many in-depth empirical analysis on the subject (220). What I find interesting is that little has changed since Atkinson first made this claim over a decade ago. Moreover, much of this attention neglects gender analysis (Craighead 43). Furthermore, where researchers do take gender as a central focus for analysis, much of the literature deals with ways that tattoos disrupt normative ideas of ideal femininity, particularly notions of beauty (Craighead 44; Mifflin 78; Braunberger 20). Thus, on the one hand researchers position the female tattooed body as an object to be gazed upon, or on the other hand, as a site of resistance to hegemonic norms. My intention, here, is not to challenge notions that women perform acts of subversion or disrupt misogynist beauty myths by inking their skin — indeed my own views align with such theories. Rather, because we know very little about the ways that women actively construct and experience their tattoos (Atkinson qtd. in Craighead 44), I have chosen specifically to examine tattoos as embodied life narratives through which women consciously communicate lived experiences. That is to say, I am interested in women's own interpretations of their tattoo narratives. This thesis, therefore, begins to fill this specific gap in the literature on tattooing practices.

Contemporary scholarship suggests that many tattooees indicate that personal expression is a significant motivation for becoming inked (Sanders and Vail 1; Mun et al. 134). As Margo DeMello says: "North American tattoos fill a need to inscribe the self as an individual and as part of, or in relationship to, a group" (14). Sanders and Vail suggest that, tattoos are a way for individuals to symbolically display gender, social status, lifestyle, values, personal interests and other identity features (4). Victoria Pitts, similarly, argues that the body is a site for establishing

identity (9) and Tami Spry says that the body is a cultural billboard through which the effects of relations between self and other are displayed (84). What emerges from the literature, then, is the notion that ink inscribed upon bodies functions as a communicative device. Bodies, in this way, can be viewed as canvases. Having said that, bodies are certainly not blank or passive canvasses; rather bodies are complex and spaces of selfhood, actively performed in relationship with social structures and discourses that are written upon the skin (Coffey 3; Modesti 202; Pitts 29). Tattoos, in other words, are simultaneously narratives of self and others. To that point, audiences should not assume that public display of inked flesh constitutes an invitation to engage the tattoo bearer in conversation regarding the interpretation of tattoos. Indeed, for some women tattoos are private matters even when those marks are displayed publicly, while for others their ink is intended to provoke dialogue. This point emerges clearly in the specific tattoo narratives I discuss later in this thesis.

Against this backdrop, this project builds upon research I conducted as part of my graduate studies coursework for Folklore 6730: Folklore and Gender in which I conducted a small research project on women's tattooing practices. For that project, I conducted semi-structured interviews with four women in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador who shared personal experience narratives about their tattoos and allowed me to photograph the images. Broadly speaking, my findings in that project were consistent with contemporary scholarship that indicates themes of empowerment, transformation and control over their own bodies are primary motivations for women to receive tattoos (DeMello 173; Mifflin 56). Beyond that, however, a nuanced site of inquiry emerged as several of my participants described their tattoos as being emblematic of their spirituality. Based on this preliminary research, I wondered whether these

women were simultaneously writing spiritual scripts and creating their own sacred stories upon their bodies — my goal in this thesis is to develop that theory in greater detail.

Adding to that, as Tami Spry and others have asserted, I propose that tattooed flesh functions as a wall or billboard whereupon the bearers' thoughts, beliefs and experiences have been inscribed (Botz-Bornstein 53; Spry 93; Mun et al. 137), as well as a space whereupon the effects of relations between self and others are displayed (Spry 84). Robert Arp, likewise, observes that tattoos are personal statements as well as public displays of those statements (xx). Thinking of tattooed flesh as performing bodies, in this way, I propose that inked bodies “are performatively doing the personal politics of culture through embodiment,” as Tami Spry states (67). In particular, I focus on ways that women perform experiences of spirituality by marking their flesh with spiritually inspired tattoos.

1.4 Tattooing as Manifestations of Spirituality

In examining tattoos as an expression of contemporary Pagan spirituality, Maureen Mercury argues that tattooing practices are manifestations of the soul's need for expression (1); therefore, images resonate with the bearers and produce a deep affect (Mercury 1). In this sense, Mercury argues that contemporary Western tattooees are using their bodies as a vehicle through which to receive and express connections to the larger cosmology (7). Scholars interested in connections between spirituality through a women-centred lens and symbolism make similar observations (Turner 219; Christ 286; Starhawk 33). For example, Kay Turner postulates that ritual is a space for women to embody images of the archetypal, the eternal feminine and the Goddess as tokens of power, transformation, harmony and duality (219). Starhawk, meanwhile, posits that feminist spiritualities are among the many forces that are shaping the genesis of new

myths (224). Likewise, Mary Condren states that symbolically rewriting mythologies leads to restructuring social order in material ways (24). Finally, Clarissa Pinkola Estés argues that stories are powerful medicine that contain the key for repair or reclamation of any lost psychic drive (14). Such observations, support the views of some bearers who explain that tattoos tell their spiritual stories. In other words, for some women, tattoos tell stories about the bearers' lived experiences.

This connection between body and self, as Sonja Modesti makes clear, is evident in contemporary body modification trends (209). Her point aligns with proposals that themes of healing, empowerment (DeMello 172 and Mifflin 4) and transformation are among the most common life stories women tell through tattooing practices. This is evident in the stories women shared as part of this thesis research. Adding to that, Mun et al. report that when tattooees attributed spiritual meanings and/or specific mythical symbols to tattoos, the bearers regularly indicated that their tattoos provided them with emotional support and protection (140).

Keeping in mind theories of embodiment that focus on the lived experience of the body, in this context, I understand spirituality to be an embodied and dynamic process. In this sense, spiritual paths, as Facio and Lara posit, are rooted in the realities of secular conditions (136). Simply stated, I think one of the features of spirituality here is that it refers to and takes seriously feelings, connections and experiences that have real effects on one's life but which cannot be empirically verified. In this way, taking the spiritual seriously is putting priority (or at least more importance than otherwise) on feeling, experience and connection in living life. From this perspective, my position aligns with that of Beverly J. Lanzetta who professes that "the richness of the term is found in the role that spirituality plays in unifying the tension between mind and

heart, body and soul, inner and outer life” (29). Admittedly, given the myriad ways in which women experience spirituality it is no simple task to define the term within the context of this thesis. Broadly speaking, spirituality, according to Michelle Téllez, is the way in which some people “relate to each other as human beings, independent of theology” (156). This stance is significant here since many of the women in this research project did not identify with any specific formal spiritual path, despite the fact that they considered their tattoos to be spiritually inspired. However, other participants had distinctly different experiences even when they identified their spiritual practices by similar labels. Téllez’s vague definition therefore does little to contextualize spirituality within this context except to acknowledge that spirituality is a personal experience that is in continuous process.

For the purpose of this thesis, in my usage, spirituality refers to a valid way of knowing and creating knowledge that takes into consideration the relationship between mind, body and spirit, or “mindbodyspirit,” (Lara and Facio, 12). To put it another way, spirituality “engages individuals through concrete practices that involve bodies, as well as minds and spirits” (McGuire qtd. in Espín 105). Lara Medina, likewise, states that spirituality is about being aware of one’s own interconnected relationship to all that can be seen as well as all that is unseen (167) and is, therefore, a way of life that effects how one acts in the world (168). In Maureen Mercury’s polytheistic Pagan view, spirituality has no unified or monolithic religious structures that govern or define how individual souls should speak (2). Instead, she claims, “...the soul or psyche has many faces and voices that need expression” (6). What this means, more specifically, is unique for each participant. Adding to that, Mercury explains that within a Pagan framework the psyche is rooted in place; thus, she says, Pagans understand themselves in relation to others,

consequently contextualizing themselves through lineage, their ancestors and their bloodlines (21-22). Notably, while my own spiritual practices align with those described by Mercury, it is equally true that other Pagans may have different experiences altogether.

John Rush, in a similar way, posits that Spirit “refers to the energy that informs all things” (163). Moreover, the word “spirit” or “spirituality” is also tied to contemporary personal development movements, which often claim no affiliation with any specific traditions, pointing to the growth of “secular spirituality,” according to Rush (141). Intriguingly, similar views were shared by participants in this study; hence, several participants understood their experiences as spiritual despite having no connection to specific spiritual traditions.

Expanding upon this, following Facio and Lara, I propose that “spirituality is something that we do” (11), a stance that draws clearly upon Butlerian theories. In this way, Facio and Lara postulate that flesh, body and spirituality are interwoven (11). Moreover, theories of flesh and spirit, they claim, function to heal the “colonial-modern, patriarchal separation between flesh and spirit” (Facio and Lara 11). Spirituality is, therefore, understood as performative. With this in mind, in this thesis, I explore the ways in which women experience and perform subjectivity by marking their flesh with what I term “spiritually-inspired tattoos.” Importantly, I have chosen to use the term “spiritually-inspired tattoos” in order to reflect the idea that such body-marking practices can symbolically display intimate details about the belief systems that shape the bearers’ thoughts and behaviours, which in turn influence the bearers’ lived bodily experiences and relationships with their own bodies and with others.

Maureen Mercury proposes that tattooing practices function as personal rituals and, as such, offer a means for tattoo bearers to weave together daily life with a sense of the sacred (7).

Along those lines, Rush explains that tattoos represent a bond between the body of the tattoo bearer and the ideas acted symbolically through their tattoos (70). To that point a “tattoo is not strictly itself, the ink under the skin,” (Rush 200); instead, tattoos are doors that open to a wonderland of ideas, memories (Rush 200) and experiences. In other words, tattoos are statements about the bearers’ selves. Spiritually-inspired tattoos, I propose, are stories about the ideas one has about spirituality, one’s relationship with divinity — whether that means having belief in some entity beyond the self or not — and one’s ideas about sacredness, specifically sacredness of the human body in this context. Undoubtedly, this has been my own experience. That is to say, my own tattoos symbolically tell sacred stories about the ways in which I experience spirituality. For me, this is true even if those tattoos are not explicitly symbolic of my spiritual path.

1.5 Storytelling

By now it should be clear that storytelling is an integral aspect of my work. However, it is not simply because I love to hear a good story or because I enjoy conjuring a grand tale that I utilize personal narratives in this thesis. Rather, storytelling is the epistemological framework on which I located this thesis. More specifically, I engage with storytelling as a way of doing research both as a theoretical concept and as a methodological process. Of course storytelling is also a means for disseminating my findings. Consequently, I situate this thesis within the borderlands between academic styles and creative expression (Lykke et al. 2). My goal, therefore, is to demonstrate that auto/biographical and auto/ethnographic performances offer a weaving together of story and theory in provocative ways (Spry 173).

On that note, I have chosen *My Tattoo Story* as a prologue for this thesis. My personal narrative, therefore, simultaneously creates a space for introductions and offers information for the reader to make sense of the story to follow (Kovach 3) thereby situating the narrator (me) within the tale that is about to unfold. In this sense, *My Tattoo Story* functions as a space of critical reflexivity that allows me to bring forth the political, social and cultural representational dimensions embedded within the research, thus creating transparency. Moreover, reflexive research insists upon locating the researcher in the way that knowledge is gained, interpreted and disseminated (Aull Davies 4; Spry 34). A critical reflexive lens, as Margaret Kovach explains, “acknowledges the politics of representation” (33). Indeed, describing “reflexivity” as a process or as a dynamic, Susan Jones contends that reflexive methodologies acknowledge that the researcher’s multiple positions and multiple selves are in continual movement (68), therefore aligning, also, with postmodern feminist theories that understand selfhood as plural and in process (Butler xxii; Butler xvii; Beauvoir 267; Modesti 209; Pitts 84). Further, Jones notes that by insisting upon transparency, reflexivity acknowledges that the researcher shapes any research outcomes, which are inescapably moulded by social, political and cultural locations along with personal experience (68). In a similar vein, Tami Spry posits that critically reflective narratives represent the “researcher’s personal and political intersections/engagements/negotiations with others in culture/history/society” (53). She explains that auto/ethnographic (and auto/biographical, I add) performance inherently requires a critical analysis of personal beliefs, values and sociocultural expectations (Spry 72). All this is to say, as a tattooed woman who is researching ways that women embody life narratives through tattooing practices, I am clearly an insider in this story. Undeniably, my thoughts, beliefs and experiences are written not only in the

ink etched into my skin but also in the words of this text and, inevitably, shape the praxis of this research project.

Equally important, as will unfold later in this thesis, my spiritual practices are an integral part of my identity; and therefore, the ideas I have about my experiences of spirituality and as a self-identified Pagan woman are inseparable from the narratives marked upon my flesh. As such, alternatively, I contemplated telling you (the reader, the audience, those who judge the veracity of my tales) about my second – text-based – tattoo. It’s not a long story, this tale of five simple words marked upon my flesh in Times New Roman font — the same font I use when writing academic papers — the font you are reading now, in fact. Inscribed in black ink. It reads: “I (th)ink, therefore I am.” It’s not the same as René Descartes’ famous dictum, you’ll notice. Rather, my ink is a disruption of that statement and, importantly, of the theories (or realities) he suggests. Instead, “I (th)ink, therefore I am.” as I have marked upon my arm reminds me of my belief in the inseparability of mind and body and spirit as aspects of the same self. It reminds me also that spirituality is a lived, embodied experience. In other words, “I (th)ink, therefore I am.” is my sacred story — my mythology.

Given these points, the significance of storytelling in this thesis is two-fold. First, I propose that stories function as “reminders of who we are and of our belonging,” as Margaret Kovach insists (95). Secondly, Neal McLeod argues that such narratives potentially “challenge the social space around us, and the way society structures the world” (99); thus, storytelling encourages people to rethink the social spaces we occupy (99). Ergo, stories provide a way to disseminate hegemonic ideas or, conversely, provide a means to subvert the status quo. As a matter of fact, according to Ian Woodward, “all aspects of our lives owe something to systems of

culture” (81), by which he means that all facets of identity are constructed and/or deconstructed through the exchange of culture.

The extent to which I introduce storytelling as a performative process in this chapter is significant, first because storytelling as praxis shapes the overall theoretical and methodological frameworks of this thesis. Secondly, storytelling also functions as a way to share the knowledge gained through the collection of personal experience narratives of women who have marked their flesh with symbols that are emblematic of their experiences and of their spiritual beliefs. With that in mind, I wish to make obvious that this project as a whole is a story; more specifically, it is a cultural, political and social narrative comprised of individual life stories that are uniquely those of the tattoo bearers who participated in this research. While some women share similar life experiences, socio-economic locations, geographical spaces, spiritual beliefs, values and ideas, this thesis does not assume a singular story of a unified experience of womanhood. Instead, I aim to demonstrate ways in which women’s embodied personal life narratives are intrinsically entwined with the stories of others and, further, I aim to place those stories in dialogue with broader social, cultural and political discourses.

1.6 Chapter Summaries

With that in mind, chapter 2 of this thesis situates my methodological strategy as a process of research that combines theory and analysis along with modes of data collection (Tuhiwai Smith 144; Pink 22; Wilson 22; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2). In particular, I develop an interdisciplinary, multi-mode approach to this research in order to propose that tattoos are a mode of performative storytelling. Beyond that, I identify auto/biography and auto/ethnography

studies in unison with feminist visual culture studies as the central lenses through which I construct this thesis.

In chapter 3, “I (th)ink, therefore I am: Performing Theories of Flesh and Spirit,” I draw upon feminist body concepts to locate this thesis within a conceptual framework that theorizes lived body experiences and the cultural, social and political meanings manifested upon those bodies, in the process, unsettling Cartesian rationalism positing mind and body as separate aspects of the same self so that I may explore women’s spiritually-inspired tattoos as embodied life narratives.

Building upon these methodological and theoretical strategies, in chapter 4 I explore the ways in which women’s tattoo narratives are intrinsically interlaced within women’s collective experiences. More specifically, informed by auto/biographical rhetoric, I explore ways in which women’s spiritually-inspired tattoos function as displays of self-expression, thereby revealing the bearer’s most intimate ideas, beliefs and experiences (Arp xiv).

In chapter 5, I examine tattoos as personal manifestos, arguing that, for some women, spiritually-inspired tattoos derive from a “dark night of the soul,” as I will explain more thoroughly in chapter 5 (May Introduction). More specifically, I claim that dark nights of the soul are the profound lived experiences that lead one to question the very meaning of life (Moore xiii). As a result, dark nights of the soul can be life altering in significant ways, as I demonstrate. Spiritually-inspired tattoos that emerge from such events, I propose, function as personal statements that encourage the tattoo bearer to act or think in certain ways. In this sense, I argue that spiritually-inspired tattoos are akin to prayer, incantation or affirmations for some inked women.

Finally, I wrap up this thesis with a discussion on the overall findings of this research project, including my reflections on ways to expand this research in future projects.

Chapter 2: Methodologies

“My dad is really cool!” Malcolm said with all the enthusiasm of an excited little boy.

“Oh?” I replied, inquisitively.

“Oh yeah, he is. My dad is really strong,” he said emphasizing the word really almost to the point of exaggeration.

“And, and, he’s got a really cool scar.”

“Really?” I responded in a tone that encouraged him to continue while, simultaneously, wondering to myself what he would think of my scar; which, by the way, is at least three times longer than my brother’s.

“And,” said Malcolm excitedly, “my dad has tattoos!”

“Oh,” I said somewhat dramatically. “Well, I have a tattoo, does that make me cool too?” Without hesitation, without pause for reflection, in fact without missing a breath, in the most genuine matter-of-fact tone Malcolm replied. “Yeah, but you have a butterfly.”

“But my dad has a dragon!” he quickly said, shifting back to his excited voice, thereby making it clear that my butterfly tattoo could not be compared to my brother’s dragon.

“And,” Malcolm added “my dad’s got like 20 tattoos!”

2.1 Methodologies Introduction

This chapter begins with this story — a conversation between myself and my then six-year-old nephew Malcolm — because it led me to think about tattoos in a critical way. Not only did I find Malcolm’s comments intriguing but, truth be told, I found his implications a little disconcerting. The thing is, nothing that Malcolm said was untrue. My brother does in fact have numerous tattoos, including a dragon, whereas I have a butterfly tattoo. Nor did I begrudge the manner in which this little boy idolized his father; honestly, it was amusing. So why did I find his comments so unsettling? Upon reflection, I considered that Malcolm’s comments had led me to question ways in which tattoos might be gendered; after all, my butterfly tattoo didn’t seem to impress my young nephew and, come to think about it, he hadn’t even mentioned his mom’s tattoos. I quickly realized, then, that my reaction stemmed from something deeper — something personal. I was not bothered by my young nephew’s insinuation that, perhaps, I could not be as

cool as his dad. Nor was I slighted by the idea that my brother's tattoos might be perceived as more exciting than my own. What was unsettling was the notion that anyone — maybe everyone — could perceive my tattoo as irrelevant when in fact the ink etched into my flesh tells a very important story about me. I also know that some (and maybe all) of my brother's tattoos tell personal stories as well.

Inspired by my conversation with Malcolm, I began to discuss tattoos with family, friends, colleagues and even complete strangers more strategically; more specifically, I began asking questions about the significance of their tattoos. During this process, I reread Tami Spry's provocative essay "Tattoo stories: A Postscript to Skins," wherein she describes autoethnography as "a narration signifying at least one interpretation of ever-fluctuating identity" (84) and I was struck by the similarities between Spry's experience and the way that my own tattoo (at the time my only tattoo) told my life story vis-à-vis the stories of others. That is to say, I contemplated how my tattoo told fragments of my life story as it was entwined with the stories of others. Spry locates her own tattoo story as an autoethnographic performance situated within the borderlands between autobiography and ethnography (84). In other words, she too was proposing that tattoos tell life stories. Not just any story, though. Rather what Tami Spry was proposing is that the vulnerable and subjective nature of autoethnographic performance (as read, in this instance, through her tattoos) opens up space to engage audiences with broader social, cultural and political discourses, and further, that such performances could potentially alter the ways bodies are read and how lived experience is understood (84-85).

Indeed, auto/ethnography and performance are key elements of this thesis, in that they ground my methodological approach. In this chapter, I begin by introducing my methodology

before moving into a discussion of my methods. Importantly, both methodology and method are integral to understanding this specific framework.

In order to do research and to write, Audre Lorde insists, “it is necessary to scrutinize not only the truth of what we speak, but also the truth of the language by which we speak it” (43). In other words, she argues that if we are to engage in meaningful, insightful research it is not merely enough to report our findings at the end of a research project but it is also essential to interrogate the process by which such conclusions are made. As such, I understand methodology as a process of research that encompasses both theory and analysis; it is not simply a mode of data collection (Tuhiwai Smith 144; Pink 22; Wilson 22; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2). As a starting point, I operate from the feminist axiom that the “personal is political,” an axiom that emerged from an essay of the same title written by feminist activist and writer Carol Hanisch in 1969. Hanish later explained that the term political, in this usage, refers to power relationships broadly speaking and not the electoral politics specifically (np). I too use the term in this broad sense to indicate that personal experience and broader power relationships are intrinsically connected.

With all that in mind, framed within feminist discourse, my research strategy involved a multimode approach; more specifically, I combined interviews and photography as a way to collect women’s tattoo stories with a contextual analysis of how those tattoos come to bear meaning. I also engaged in auto/ethnographic memory work and critical self-reflection. This textual/visual framework is, as Margo DeMello has observed, particularly useful for exploring the complex, multivalent meanings within ink narratives (173). American tattoo artist Ed Hardy, similarly, suggests that tattoos are never merely what they appear to be; therefore, in order to really understand a tattoo the viewer must get to know the person wearing it (Mifflin 82).

Likewise, the intention of texts, according to Vilém Flusser, is to explain images (11). This juxtaposition of personal narratives, textual analysis and photography reveals thought provoking new ways to grapple with the intersection of gender, culture and identity; moreover, by taking this approach I am better able to understand how subjectivity is performed through culture (A. Jones 31; 2) as well as constructed by it (Grosz 141; Butler 10; Beauvoir 267). As Victoria Pitts proposes, consciously or otherwise, body art symbolically reflects the relationships between self and other(s) (14). Indeed, one of the aims of this thesis is to demonstrate, as Simmons proposes, that tattoos are visual narratives that, intentionally or otherwise, have value beyond the personal precisely because tattoos potentially engage others in broader social and critical contexts (54). Specifically, tattoos do this with regard to how women's experiences of spirituality are simultaneously written upon and consciously expressed through their bodies.

A methodology framed through the idea of storytelling is central to my work. In this context, storytelling refers to a variety of ways of sharing cultural scripts, which include life narratives and visual storytelling. Linda Tuhiwai Smith contends that storytelling is a meaningful way to address issues of "voice and visibility" as well as "silence and invisibility" (144); as such, it would appear to be an ideal vehicle for feminist research. Storytelling, in this context, offers a way through which to explore personal experiences, create meaning and communicate with others (Simmons 54; Bacchilega 17). There are numerous storytellers in this thesis. As the narrator and creator of this thesis, I necessarily play a significant role in the dissemination of this narrative; nevertheless, it is my goal to provide a platform here for women's stories to be told in their own voices. I expand on this point below.

Shawn Wilson explains that — in the role of storyteller — the researcher must introduce themselves and the paradigm in which the research is located in order for the audience to make sense of the story; in doing so, the researcher's beliefs and assumptions about reality are made clear (33). From this view, the researcher is inseparable from the subject at hand (Wilson 77). Hence, in the role of storyteller, a researcher enters into a relationship with participants by gathering and sharing personal narratives (Wilson 115). I explore the conceptual terrain of storytelling in the next section.

2.2 Storytelling as a Methodology

By now it will be clear that storytelling as a methodology is a complex, critical engagement with the ways in which knowledge is produced. This approach to knowledge production encompasses not just researcher and participant, but also the audience more broadly speaking. I wish, then, to ask readers to consider their own “response-ability” in this production. I borrow this term from Kim Anderson, who first borrowed it from Ojibway poet and professor Kim Blaser, to suggest that the audience is as much a part of the creation of the story as the teller (Anderson 49). Thus, the audience too carries responsibility for the production and dissemination of knowledge (49). In other words, the location of the audience — in this case, the reader of this thesis — their assumptions about tattoos, beliefs about women's spirituality, and their own histories and experiences — significantly shape the interpretation of the stories offered in here (Anderson 50). My usage of storytelling as a methodology also emerges from feminist visual culture studies' perspectives on ways that stories impact relationships between the self and its other(s). Scholars such Jayne Wark and Helen Potkin, for example, argue that the goal of feminist performance art — which I would understand to include tattoos — is to alter the praxis

of everyday life (Wark 204; Potkin 76). Furthermore, I share Amelia Jones' position that, when combined, feminism and cultural studies play a significant role in expanding theories concerning subjectivity and power (45).

Given that personal narratives are intrinsically linked to broader social, cultural and political discourses, storytelling — through interviewing and photography — gives me a way to develop frameworks that demonstrate how tattoos potentially reveal the bearers' life stories. Importantly, such methodologies also provide space for my voice and lived experience to emerge through my usage of auto/biographical and auto/ethnographical practices. Storytelling as a methodology, therefore, provides a way for researcher, participants and audiences to share in the construction and dissemination of those narratives. Stories, in this iteration, offer traces of experiences through which audiences can make sense of their own lives and histories (McLeod 13; Perreault and Kadar Introduction). Indeed, Heewon Chang indicates that studying and writing self narratives are of great value in understanding one's self and ways in which the personal is connected to others (33), particularly in a cultural sense (44). The upshot is that I am interested in the ways that tattooed women are “performatively doing the personal politics of culture through embodiment” (Spry 67).

As such, I utilize an analytical approach that I term performative auto/biographical storytelling. By this, I mean to suggest that I use a triple analytical lens that relies on life writing and auto/biography studies, autoethnography and visual methodologies. On the one hand, the term performative, in my usage, refers to performance as an identity performance, particularly as understood by Judith Butler (Butler xv), I explore this in greater detail in the next chapter. On the other hand, I draw on the term to imply a way of telling stories *through* performance (Allegranti

4). While Butler herself rejects a direct correlation between her concept of performativity and performance as a cultural form (Wark 126), it remains the case that Butler's position does not go unquestioned. Jayne Wark, for example, suggests that questions of subjectivity and agency lie at the heart of this distinction between performance and performativity (126-127), but points out that Elin Diamond posits that performance culture "is the site upon which performativity is materialized" (Wark 126). I do not want to imply that the terms are interchangeable; however, in my usage performative storytelling is theoretically informed by Butler's ideas on performativity. Tattoos, in this sense, function as polysemic scripts through which everyday experiences are performed (Fenske 7) on/in bodies. Indeed, what we understand as our selves and our bodies, as Rachel C. Falkenstern points out, "are both part of the same continually changing process, inextricably linked and in a reciprocal relationship with one another" (98). In a similar sense, Victoria Pitts asserts that people tell stories about themselves and others concerning the meaning of their embodiment through body modification practices, including tattooing (Pitts 73). For this reason, Pitts further claims that body-stories are in continual flux; thus, open to the possibilities of reinscription and renaming (73). To scratch the surface (pun intended) of the concept of the performative more deeply, I return to Wendy Lynn Lee's claim that tattoos are never merely just there, but rather that they are performative. By this she means that they *do* something — tattoos tell important stories about the tattoo bearer (153). More to the point, Lee proposes that "... however their stories are told (truthfully or as complete fabrications), tattoos tell a story or stories of the relationship of a human being to their body..." (156).

Further, I locate my research process within the sphere of *emergent* research, (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 8). Emergent research methods disrupt the boundaries of more conventional

research approaches by using creative approaches with the aim of enhancing knowledge building (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 3-4). Storytelling as a methodology, I propose, fits that description. Adding to that, photography and other visual methods are understood as modes of knowledge production within emergent research paradigms (Holm 325). This perspective aligns with my proposal that tattoos are performative — they do something — rather than functioning only as symbolic representations of specific concepts. Finally, moving beyond the confines of standard academic style writing, I follow Nina Lykke et al. in *Writing Academic Texts Differently: Intersectional Feminist Methodologies and the Playful Art of Writing* (2014), who assert the relevance of creating a writing style that moves between a more formal academic voice and the informal voice of the storyteller. For this reason, I use personal stories (mine and those of my participants) strategically throughout this thesis to engage the audience in critical dialogue.

2.3 Feminist Visual Culture

When photographer and tattoo researcher Vince Hemingson professed that “beauty is skin deep, but a tattoo goes all the way to the bone” (10), what he meant was that tattoos can have profound meaning that far exceeds mere decoration (10). Tattoos, he says, tell stories that illuminate an aspect of the bearer’s self (10). Margo DeMello, similarly, asserts that tattoo stories are much more self-reflexive than other forms of self-narratives (152). Tattoo narratives, DeMello further posits, are “especially constructed to re-create for both the teller and the listener not only the ‘facts’ of the tattoo but the complex justification for it” (152). That is not to imply that tattoo narratives are untruthful; rather, it means that tattoos tell many truths. To my mind, what Hemingson and DeMello highlight here is that tattoos are visual stories that, often, reveal the most intimate details of the bearers’ inner selves whilst simultaneously functioning as

portraits that externally display aspects of the tattooed persons' identities, which are not fixed but instead are a continuous process. For this reason, I draw upon feminist visual culture methodologies (theories and practices) in order to better understand the ways that women's spiritually inspired tattoos are embodied life narratives.

Broadly speaking, visual culture can be defined as visual, aural and textual representations of the shared practices of a group, community, or society (Struken and Cartwright 1). Yet visual images do not stand alone, as feminist visual culture scholar Sarah Pink contends; rather, images (like texts), are interpreted by audiences influenced by multilayered factors including: theoretical beliefs, disciplinary agendas, gender, personal experience and different visual cultures (39). I argue, therefore, that a feminist visual culture approach offers a lens through which to understand how audiences respond to such images. Importantly, this point links back to Kim Anderson's assertion that audiences are, in part, responsible for the creation of narratives and, equally important, to the notion that audiences play a role in the dissemination of stories.

As an example, numerous women who participated in this research project have tattoos of pentagrams (or pentacles, as some say) — a five pointed star enclosed in a circle — that are intended to represent an aspect of Pagan spirituality for the bearers. However, despite this association with Pagan spirituality, the pentagram can symbolize different things for different women, and as such, functions as an ambiguous sign. This ambiguous sign, however, is often misunderstood by viewers unfamiliar with Pagan practices. Therefore, the bearers' intentions and, consequently, identities, might be misread by the audience who draw upon their own interpretation of the sign instead. In doing so, audiences may be constructing their own versions

of the bearers' life narratives, despite the fact that those stories may not truthfully reflect the tattooed persons' own lived experience. Indeed, as Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright argue, images are interpreted through both the intended and unintended meanings framed within social context (26-27) by others.

Importantly, I want to make clear that visual culture is not only about what is visible; rather it is also about what is not visible (Sturken and Cartwright 6). In other words, research located within feminist visual culture studies is concerned also with the ways in which ideas, beliefs and life experiences are *implicitly* rather than explicitly expressed. In this case, that means that I need to be attentive to the concepts underpinning the ideas that each participant has about her own tattoos as well as the ideas implied by others. Feminist visual culture methodologies, therefore, investigate the ways in which lives are informed beyond the perceptions of specific images (Sturken and Cartwright 4). As a result, feminist visual culture approaches provide a lens through which to explore women's tattoos as embodied life narratives vis-à-vis social, cultural and political discourses.

As a subtopic of feminist visual culture, I use photography as a methodology rather than merely a mode of documentation. What I mean by this is that the collaborative process of making photographs with participants has allowed me to further explore ways in which women interact with their bodies and, more specifically, with their tattoos. In this way, photography provides a tool through which self and identity are consciously constructed and represented (Evans 110). Returning to Vince Hemingson's proposal that tattoos tell stories about the bearer's most intimate self (10), I consider his proposal that photographic portraits externally display some aspect of the individual's identity. Like Hemingson, I am fascinated by the potential of photographic portraits

of tattooed bodies to display aspects of both the external and the internal self of tattooed beings (10). Indeed, as a tattooed woman researching inked bodies and as a photographer who identifies as a feminist, I am acutely aware that the body is a constructed text whereupon social, cultural and political discourses have been inscribed. Moreover, I recognize that I am participating in attributing meaning to those inscriptions precisely because photographs present tattooed bodies in a new way, with a new consciousness and a new comportment to new audiences. Hence, it is necessary for me to critically interrogate the ways in which photographs I make — within the boundaries of this thesis and beyond — represent the subjects of my images.

Timothy Dow Adams posits that photography and autobiography operate on a parallel trajectory in that both deliberately blur the boundaries between fact and fiction and between representation and creation (20). That is to say, despite the fact that many viewers may take a photograph at face-value, thereby assuming that the scene in view is an accurate representation of the subject at hand — whether that subject may be a person, place or event — in reality photographs are arranged in such ways as to reveal what it is the photographer wishes the audience to see or experience. In this way, what is left out of the photograph is equally as important as what remains visible in terms of staging the scene that the photographer attempts to convey to the audience. Moreover, the audience plays a significant role in deciphering the meaning of photographs and such interpretations are based on the viewer's previous knowledge, assumptions and even prejudices. It is precisely this interaction between the photographer, audience and the subject that creates the specific storyline of any particular photograph. Hence, blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction, representation and creation, as Adams puts it (20) is entirely plausible in photography. Auto/biographical photography, therefore, is a staged

performance and, thus, I argue that photographs reveal only partial truth and auto/biographical photographs fragments of the self. Indeed, as world renowned photographer Richard Avedon said, “[a]ll photographs are accurate; none of them the truth” (qtd. in Reece 5).

In a similar way, Linda Harvey Rugg claims that photographs and autobiographies both offer a means to explore the ways in which “images and texts relate to the body” and, importantly, how both mediums construct perceptions of selfhood while simultaneously being constructed by them (9). To be clear, by locating photography within the realm of autobiography my intention here is two-fold. First, I understand tattoos and photographs to operate similarly as mediums of self-expression and self-formation. Thus, adding to the literature presented here, I make this correlation based on my own experience as a tattooed woman and a photographer who, perhaps not surprisingly, is invested in photographing tattooed bodies.

I use my camera as a medium to collaborate with research participants in creating images. These images serve both as documents and as representations; that is, they document the tattoos, but they also represent the participants’ identities as they wish to convey themselves to broader audiences. In this way, I actively link photography with performance (Levin 328). The images created for this research project do not merely place women on display, which in the process renders them passive. Rather, these women are active participants mutually engaged in a performance with the photographer. They act with agency through — and with — the camera lens. In this sense, my photographs are auto/biographical texts (Ruggs 5). As such, when displaying tattoo images — for example, during public presentations of this research — I include excerpts of the participants’ own narratives, thereby influencing how the tattoos are interpreted by audiences. I include photographs in my analysis chapters as well.

Equally important, I engage in photography as a methodology to address both the conscious self and the unconscious self in ways that speech cannot (Kopytin 144). In Vilém Flusser’s words, “[i]mages are mediations between the world and human beings” (9); maps, he says, created by humans in order to magically recreate our *reality* (emphasis mine) (10). The same is true of tattoos. In that sense, photographs challenge the notion of a stable and singular self (Dow Adams 231; Grundberg 170). At a methodological level, performative autobiographical storytelling through photography provides tattooed women — myself included — “with a voice and a place from which to speak about their particular experiences as women” (Wark 124). The photographs here offer a way to grapple with the ontological question: Who am I? In this way, I propose that photographs are akin to performance art or living things (Fenske 23) in that the images provoke witnesses to interrogate the politics of visibility and, therefore, call into question the structures through which performances of subjectivity take place (A. Jones 23).

Photographs, I propose, are both utilitarian and theoretical. More to the point, on one hand, they are purposeful in that they record tattoos for the researcher to return to as reminders of participants’ visual narratives. Moreover, when images are included during presentations of this research they are also useful for displaying the intertextual narratives at hand to audiences who otherwise would be left to their own imagination in visualizing a snake winding up the length of an arm or the gestures of elephants scripted across a chest. On the other hand, from a theoretical stance, “If photographs are messages,” as Susan Sontag writes, then “the message is both transparent and mysterious” (111). More specifically, it is clear that photographs of tattoos offer an obvious replica of the body art. Beyond that, though, I propose that tattoo portraits

offer a gateway into a philosophical exploration of the bearers' innermost self, just as tattoos do when viewed live. All photographs, therefore, create documents while at the same time are visual works of art (Emerling 118). I continue this discussion, albeit in less theoretical terms, in the methods section below.

2.4 Auto/biography & Auto/ethnography

“subjectivity is not, after all, an out-of-body experience”
(Sidonie Smith qtd. in Rugg 11)

As indicated above, I understand tattoos to be visual performances of selfhood. More precisely, I use the term performative auto/biographical storytelling to indicate that tattoos are stories about the self and one's relationships to others. Equally important, I use this term to indicate that such stories are in constant flux precisely because identity is in constant movement. In this section, I further explore this concept by locating my usage of performative auto/biographical storytelling within autobiography studies and auto/ethnography.

Auto/biography studies is an interdisciplinary field that recognizes multiple forms of writing and visual culture as auto/biographical (Rak 18; Grace ch. 4; Sidonie and Watson 3). Feminist auto/biography scholarship emphasizes personal knowledge and aims to avoid the pitfall of making “grand narratives” about women's experience (Rak 15). As such, in my work, I do not profess that “woman” is a unified group, even as this thesis focuses on the ways in which women's spiritually-inspired tattoos function as auto/biographical texts, a point on which I expand below.

The term autobiography, Sidonie Smith and Julie Watson explain, derives from the Greek language wherein *autos* means “self”, with *bios* referring to “life” and *graphe* meaning “write”;

simply put, then, autobiography means self writing (ch. 1). Building upon that, a methodological engagement with auto/biography offers me an insightful way of examining women's representation (Smith and Watson 5) because auto/biography is a discourse concerned with identity and representation (Rak 17). Moreover, this approach purposefully locates personal narratives at the centre of discussion. In doing so, the voices of the women involved in this study are the foundation upon which this thesis emerges, rather than merely complementary quotations added as supporting material.

Moreover, Sidonie Smith explains that auto/biography is a performative act that requires an audience. In this way, she reframes Judith Butler's notion of performativity to suggest that auto/biography is not a singular story but many stories enacted contextually (110). To think of it another way, autobiographical subjects do not exist outside of experience (Smith and Watson ch. 2), which is informed by specific, yet pliable, social, cultural and political discourses. Consequently, as Smith and Watson propose, the boundaries of the self — the "I" — are frequently shifting and flexible (ch. 3). That said, I keep in mind Charlotte Burck's proposal that selfhood is an assemblage of stories through which different and new constructions of self potentially emerge (367). Thus, I propose that auto/biographical scripts are symbolic interactions that are dynamic and always in flux (Smith and Watson ch. 2).

I understand auto/biography and auto/ethnography as distinct, yet, interlinking methodologies. Indeed, as Carolyn Ellis et al. have observed, auto/ethnography is a methodology that combines elements of autobiography and ethnography (2). More specifically, Christine S. Davis and Carolyn Ellis describe auto/ethnography as a process that includes research, writing, story and method connecting the autobiographical and personal to cultural, social and political

contexts (Davis and Ellis 284). Ellis et al. state that auto/ethnography “seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (1). As a methodology, auto/ethnography moves beyond traditional ways of writing and is often written as evocative stories — as I have done in this thesis — that are intended to affect audiences emotionally, while at the same time grappling with concerns of representation (Davis and Ellis 285). In particular, auto/ethnographic approaches specifically addresses ideas of who is speaking for whom (Davis and Ellis 285). Furthermore, emerging auto/ethnographies allow for multivocal styles of research and writing which potentially include the voices of numerous authors or — as I have done here — take into account the voices of study participants (285).

Auto/ethnography has developed into a methodology that encompasses co-constructed narratives and interactive interviewing. According to Davis and Ellis, this multi-vocal approach allows researchers to weave our own stories with our relationships with family, friends and research participants (some of whom are the same persons) (289). As Davis and Ellis further indicate, such techniques allow researchers and audiences to better understand the “lived experiences and relationship practices of ourselves in interaction with others and the multiple interpretations, experiences, and voices emergent in our lives and in our stories” (Davis and Ellis 289). It is precisely in this context that I engage with auto/ethnography. My aim is not to exclusively place my own tattoo stories at the centre of this project but instead to place them in dialogue with the stories of the other participants. Indeed, it is with this in mind that I insert a dash between auto and ethnography — in the same way I do with auto/biography — to represent that personal experience is intrinsically interwoven within social, cultural and political contexts.

Furthermore, my approach to auto/ethnography is significantly shaped by the ideas of Tami Spry who brings together auto/ethnography and performance methodologies as a critical method through which to explore culture and communication and, perhaps more importantly, as a way to think through embodied experiences (35). As is true for auto/ethnographic practices in general, Spry contends that performative auto/ethnography aims to transform underlying hegemonic systems (Spry 20). Thus, she explains that the practice is about connection; more specifically, it represents that connection between self and others and involves links between personal experience and broader social issues (52). Within this methodology, Spry contends that “the personal is inherently political” (53) and further, that performative auto/ethnography can be a tool for resistance and emancipation from scripts such as cultural and familial identity that regulate bodies, particularly identity (87). These ideas are similar to those of Neal McLeod who suggests that narratives potentially “challenge the social space around us, and the ways society structures the world” (99). Following this proposal, Spry asserts that “good” auto/ethnography is more than a self-reflective confessional tale; instead it weaves together story and theory in provocative ways (713). Consequently, it requires critical reflection upon the self and our entanglements with others, particularly in cultural and social conditions (126; 713).

So what makes Tami Spry’s stance on performative auto/ethnography any different from auto/ethnography as described by other leading scholars? The answer to this question is not simple. In fact, I am not sure that there is a distinction beyond the fact that Spry specifically identifies her work as performative whereas other scholars such as Carolyn Ellis do not. In any case, for Spry, performative auto/ethnography means performing one’s life story for an audience — even when that audience is one’s self. While performance may occur in traditional venues

such as theatre, dance or film, it is, however, not limited to live performance. Given this, I include photography and, indeed tattoos, as performance stories.

My engagement with auto/biography and auto/ethnography methodologies considers my experiences as a tattooed woman as integral to this thesis. More importantly, though, such approaches place my personal narratives into conversation with the stories of women who participated in this research project in order to explore women's spiritually inspired tattoos within the broader social, cultural and political landscapes.

2.5 Methods

Intrigued by Tami Spry's invitation to "[t]hink of research as a voice in the conversation of your work" (145), I wondered what it might mean to approach my research as a dialogue, a conversation with my critical imagination, as she puts it (145). Where might my voice end and the voices of my participants begin? How will it be clear who is speaking, and for whom? And, most importantly is every voice being heard and represented respectfully?

Intertwined with my own voice are the voices of ten self-identified women and one transgender person who is transitioning from female-to-male and describes their gender as ambiguous.¹ Some participants have chosen to be identified by their full names, whereas others have chosen to use their first name only or a pseudonym. My fieldwork makes clear that there is no "stereotypical" tattooed woman: participants range in age from early twenties to nearly fifty; Karen has only one tattoo and the others have two or more. Lori, Sheila, Scotia and I are

¹ To that point, for ease of writing Dane has indicated that it is not necessary to single him out when referring to the participants as a whole; as such, when I write of the women of this study as a group this includes Dane. However, when speaking of him directly I use male pronouns and/or gender neutral pronouns (they, their, et cetera), as per request. We have chosen to avoid other gender neutral terms such as s/he, zir, or ze, for example, because in Dane's mind, generally speaking, people have a difficult enough time understanding transgender without adding complex terminology to the process.

mothers, the others are not. All have some level of post-secondary education, ranging from undergraduate courses to holding advanced degrees. Some identify as Newfoundlanders, meaning their sense of “home” is the island portion of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador; others, meanwhile, were born and/or grew up in other parts of Canada. Jessica holds citizenship with Canada, United States and Mexico. To that point, Jessica and Sarah expressed the significance of mixed ancestry in shaping their identities and spiritual paths. Many are artists; Sheila and Zaren, for example are painters, Scotia is a writer and poet and Jaime and Lori are belly dancers and singers. At the time interviews took place, eight participants were students, with two of those women, Scotia and Zaren, being simultaneously employed full-time. Sheila was training to be a welder, Helen was training to be a chef, and the rest were pursuing academic degrees. Of the women who were not students, all are employed in professional fields. For example: Lori is a lawyer, Karen is a social worker and Jaime, a government employee. I was acquainted with five out of the eleven participants as colleagues and/or friends prior to participation in this study. Finally, given that this thesis is situated within feminist praxis, I feel it is noteworthy to mention that more than half of the women identify as feminists and indicated their feminism is entwined with their tattoo narratives, to various degrees. Importantly, such diverse life experiences are also a reminder that there is no single understanding of what it means to be a woman; and thus, even as some women share similar group experiences, each woman’s life story is unique.

With regard to spiritual practices, Karen and Jessica consider themselves to be spiritual beings; however, they also indicate that their practices have no labels. Helen, on the other hand did not speak about spirituality specifically but described her tattoos as symbolic of her outlook

on life and as reflections of her life experiences, while Dane, somewhat jokingly, said that his spirituality label is “pending.” Two women identified as atheists; one of these women, Ruth, was once a devout Evangelical Christian who no longer keeps that faith yet still finds meaning in the spiritual tattoos she received during that time in her life, including the cross and rose tattooed onto her forearm. From a different perspective, Zaren, who is committed to her identity as an atheist, nevertheless embodies a spiritual worldview that does not include belief in deities or the existence of any concept of an afterlife. Within these two groups, several women mentioned Buddhism as influential in shaping their personal beliefs and values. The remaining women – Scotia, Sheila, Jaime Lori, Sarah and I – identify as Pagan, a spiritual practice rooted in earth-based spirituality. I will expand on these definitions in subsequent chapters where I explore notions of spirituality and religious belief in greater detail.

How does one go about recruiting for a study on women’s spiritual tattoos as embodied life narratives? In this case, I first utilized the social networking site, Facebook. To begin I used my “update status” space as a platform to invite my contacts to participate in my study because the women who participated in my pilot project (written for my Folklore course) were recruited through this strategy. Since that strategy was successful in the beginning stages I utilized the same platform once ethics approval had been secured for this thesis. In addition to this, I undertook a poster campaign (See appendix 1). In particular, I placed posters in cafes and on public bulletin boards mainly in the downtown area of St. John’s and on the campus of Memorial University. I also placed posters in two tattoo studios and shared the poster on my Facebook page, inviting my contacts to share the image with their contacts. Finally, I used a “snowball” approach, with some participants recruited by earlier participants. In all cases, I advertised for

participants who self-identified as women, were over the age of nineteen (the age of consent in Newfoundland and Labrador), and had at least one tattoo that represented their current or past spiritual beliefs. Once initial contact was made I emailed potential participants an information letter outlining the purpose of this study as well as the commitment required.

I conducted semi-structured interviews between February and October 2014. I also photographed participants' tattoos. I chose this dual approach to give space for participants' stories to emerge in their own voices (and on their own skins).

In order for conversation to emerge naturally, I intentionally chose an informal approach to the interviewing process. In particular, rather than a strictly question and answer format, I used a semi-structured interviewing format; that is to say, I prepared specific questions in advance, which I then used to prompt dialogue. To begin, I reminded participants that we were there to record their stories and I asked them to take the lead in unfolding their own stories. I described this format to my participants as "having a conversation" and, in my experience, this style of interviewing is most productive for creating space for intimate dialogue. Additionally, at the end of each interview I asked participants if there was anything that they would like to add to the conversation or if there was any specific topic that they would like to elaborate on. Several participants took this as an opportunity to further expand on themes they had previously touched upon or to introduce new ideas. This process invited participants to be self reflexive.

On a technical note, I recorded each interview, usually with two devices. I later transcribed the interviews and offered copies to each participant along with a 5x7 photographic print of one of their tattoos, chosen at my discretion, as a token of my appreciation. Interviews ranged from just under 40 minutes to 1 1/2 hours. Two factors contributed to this variation;

firstly, the length of interviews varied depending upon how many tattoos the participant had; not surprisingly, interviews with women who had numerous tattoos took significantly more time. Second, in the case where participants and I had previously known one another, the interview tended to be significantly longer. Indeed, all but one of the longer interviews were with participants with whom I had a prior relationship; as such, I was able to probe into their comments more deeply based upon previous knowledge. The last long interview was with Dane, who was heavily tattooed and invested in sharing his in-depth stories.

Given that the narratives were of personal life experiences, it was possible that participants could, while revisiting memories bound to their tattoos, experience some level of discomfort or become anxious or upset during the interview process. In this event, I was prepared to stop the interview, reschedule it or redirect the questions to topics that did not make the participant feel uncomfortable. Additionally, if participants became upset by the interview, I was prepared to direct them to the University Counselling Centre at Memorial University. Notably, participants were made aware that these options were available before the interview took place and information for the University Counselling Centre was given on the Informed Consent Form (see appendix 2), each participant signed and received a copy of this document. In only one incidence did a participant divulge information that seemed to cause emotional discomfort. In this case, I offered my sympathy but did not linger on the topic as she clearly did not want to continue to discuss the matter. I followed her lead and allowed her to direct the conversation into a different direction. In general, participants expressed that the interview process helped them better articulate their experiences as tattooed women and they were excited to share in the research process.

With regard to utilizing photography, I align my own approach with the work of Jessica Evans who proposes that photography as a method is a useful tool for documenting everyday life experiences, often with the intention of engaging in “consciousness raising” efforts (Evans 108). In this way, I used my camera as a medium to collaborate with research participants in creating images. These images serve both as documents and as representations; that is, they document the tattoos, but they also represent the participants’ identities as they wish to convey themselves to broader audiences. As mentioned earlier, participants actively engaged in the photograph-making process, thereby acting with agency through — and with — the camera lens.

One way that women shaped this process was by selecting which tattoos I was able to photograph by the choice of attire they wore during the interview. For example, Helen intentionally wore shorts that would allow me to photograph the tattoo on her thigh; however, I was unable to photograph one of Jessica’s tattoos located in a similar part of her body because she wore full-length pants. Dane, likewise, suggested that he remove his shirt and cover his breasts with his hands in order to display the elephant tattoo on his chest in a way that would be acceptable to display the photograph publicly. Admittedly, participants who were photographed in my home — Zaren, Jaime, Lori, Scotia and Sheila — had more opportunity to make more creatively expressive portraits given that the location was private and we had more time to consider different poses. This point is significant because it meant that these women were able to explore and possibly push their personal comfort zones with regard to how they displayed their tattooed bodies, thus shaping the life stories they chose to share with me. As an example, Scotia and Sheila both appear topless and draped in the black fabric in order to display the tattoos each woman has covering her back (see figure 4.9 in chapter 4). Importantly, regardless of how

participants' tattoos were photographed, every woman was in full control of how her body was displayed. Simply put, participants act with agency through — and with — the camera lens. Indeed, had either Scotia or Sheila chosen to be photographed with their shirts, thus obscuring their tattoos, the way in which viewers interpreted each woman's tattoo story may have been affected.

Equally significant, when making photographs with participants and displaying those photographs during presentations of this research project, I have made conscious efforts to create images that acknowledge the tattoo story as part of that woman's life story. For this reason, I chose to frame the photographs in ways that show the tattoo is part of her body, even when portraits obscure the woman's face. In doing so, I remind viewers that tattoos do not exist separately from the body on which they are marked, but rather, I propose, that tattoos tell the bearers' life stories, at least in part. In this way, I actively link photography with performance art (Levin 328).

All in all, in this thesis, I place performative auto/biographical storytelling at the centre of my methodological strategy. In doing so, I draw upon life writing and auto/biography studies, auto/ethnography and visual methodologies in order to explore women's spiritually-inspired tattoos as embodied life narratives. Importantly, my interdisciplinary and multimode approach is rooted firmly within feminist research strategies that, unquestionably, inform the ways in which I gain, produce and disseminate knowledge within this project.

Building upon this, in the next chapter, I expand upon ideas introduced here in order to outline the conceptual foundations of this thesis. In doing so, I affirm my position that methodologies, in my usage, involves a system combining modes of data collection and theory.

Chapter 3: I (th)ink, therefore I am: Performing Theories of Flesh and Spirit

3.1 Theory Introduction

Etched into my flesh in black ink (Times New Roman font) are the words “I (th)ink, therefore I am” (Figure 3.1), a reminder of the fluid enmeshment of mind, body and spirit. A reminder, also, that the body’s corporeality is both a dynamic and performing process (Fenske 55). By this I mean that the body is a space where meaning is made through discourse – it is written upon – but I also argue that, as Mindy Fenske and others explain, the body is simultaneously actively involved in its own production (writing itself) (55; see also: Pitts 84; DeMello 173; Grosz 146). My simple tattoo, like the ink worn by many others, is “...an artwork whose meaning is never exhausted, but instead is continually being reinterpreted; and a symbol and a part of the continuous process of self-understanding and self-production” (Falkenstern 97).



Figure 3.1: “I (th)ink, therefore I am.” tattoo on my right arm, tattooed in black ink. Photo credit: Gina Snooks.

Women’s bodies are a central focus of this thesis. More specifically, I examine women’s spiritually-inspired tattoos as performative auto/biographical life narratives. To put it another

way, I am interested in the life stories that women tell through tattooing practices, particularly as those narratives pertain to experiences of spirituality. This chapter, therefore, draws upon feminist body concepts to situate my work within contemporary scholarship that theorizes lived bodily experiences and the cultural, political and social meanings inscribed upon those bodies that mediate such experiences (Conboy et al. 1; Grosz 143; Pitts 35; Falkenstern 99; A. Jones 39; Butler 172; Butler 21). Underpinning my thesis, is the work of scholars who aim to make bodies visible without fully reducing the experience of personhood to biology (Gronnvoll 99). That is to say, I emphasize women's lived experience through narratives told about and through the body; however, I reject essentialist notions that suggest women's gendered experiences are located within sexual difference and, thus, presumed to be solely biological. Feminist phenomenological theories, therefore, inform my ideas. As Simms and Stawarska explain, "a critical phenomenology understands the contingencies of human experience and consciousness and works on understanding the pervasive influences of ideology, politics, language, and power structures as they construct and constrain the lived experiences of people" (11). Phenomenology, in my usage, provides an immersive and lived — or practice-based — approach for understanding ways in which women's tattoos are experienced as embodied life narratives.

In particular, I employ corporeal feminisms that seek to disrupt Cartesian views upholding "dualistic conceptions of mind and body as separable and separate aspects of the self and focus on ways the body is lived and experienced" (Coffey 5). This point is significant because as Julia Coffey states, these binary legacies of Cartesian thought continue to influence gendered experiences precisely because they promote belief in the inherent opposition of sex and gender, thereby upholding hierarchal systems of power, which many feminists have sought to

problematize and deconstruct (2). Notably, by taking up feminist theories of embodiment I make connections between, on the one hand, patriarchal oppressions that are justified through presumptions that women are fixed to their corporeality, more so than men (Grosz 5), and, on the other hand, women's lived experiences that are narrated through tattoos. Furthermore, Elizabeth Grosz, following Maurice Merleau-Ponty, writes that a phenomenological reflection on the body reveals that one's subjectivity is not separate from the world or from one's interactions with others (86). Phenomenology, in this way, aligns with feminist approaches commitment to locating theory in lived experience, as Judith Butler makes explicit (485).

With these points in mind, I theorize the body as a space where subjectivity is enacted materially (Conboy et al. 2). Simply stated, following Judith Butler, I affirm that the body "is a materiality that bears meaning" (484). To think of it another way, I propose that the body is a space for performing selfhood (Pitts 28). What I wish to make clear, then, is that identities are produced intersubjectively. As Victoria Pitts explains, this means that identities "are not fixed essences to be discovered but rather processes of both reflection and interaction with others that are continually performed and revised through and within embodiment" (84). Adding to that, along with critics of Cartesianism, I assert that subjectivity is embodied and contingent upon self/other relations, as Jayne Wark suggests (125). In this way, I theorize that tattooing practices are one way in which individuals corporeally express the continuous process of embodied subjectivity.

Furthermore, my theories align with Daniel Schachter who writes "we construct our autobiographies from fragments of experience that change over time" (qtd. in Smith and Watson 9); subjectivity, in other words, is not fixed. Moreover, following from materialism and

phenomenology, subjectivity, in my understanding, is a matter of becoming, not being, and as such is unpredictable, constitutive, and experimental. That is to say, I understand subjectivity to be an emergent performance. In this way, my ideas are influenced by contemporary feminist theorists who think about the body as “an active, sometimes recalcitrant force” as Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman write (Introduction). Moreover, Alaimo and Hekman explain that the aim of material feminism is to explore the “interaction of culture, history, discourse, technology, biology and the ‘environment,’ without privileging any one of these elements” (2008, Introduction). Stemming from these conceptual frameworks, similar to my interpretation of subjectivity, I understand identity to be a dynamic process wherein individual selfhood is constructed as a multitude of stories (Burck 367). Judith Butler, likewise argues that the “body is not passively scripted with cultural codes, as if it were a lifeless recipient of wholly pre-given cultural relations. But neither do embodied selves pre-exist the cultural conventions which essentially signify bodies” (488). I argue, therefore, that the meanings embedded within tattoos are both emergent and multilayered.

With these points in mind, themes of embodiment and identity performance are integral to my thesis; indeed, these themes inform my understanding of the ways in which women’s spiritually-inspired tattoos communicate ideas that the bearers have about themselves and others. On this point, I remind readers that, in my usage, the term “embodiment” refers to the material or visible expressions, ideas, feelings and experiences that are manifested on and within the body. More precisely, I understand embodiment to be a fluid *process* that is in continual movement and shifts according to an individual’s lived experience (Allegranti 2). In other words, “[t]he self is inexorably embodied,” as Amelia Jones claims (34). From this perspective, I propose that

spiritually-inspired tattoos are chosen by the those who bear them in order to express the ideas that bearers have (or have had) about their spiritual beliefs and practices. In this way, for some women, skin functions as the “expressive space” by which one experiences the world, as Amelia Jones, following Maurice Merleau-Ponty, contends (39).

Beyond that, my ideas are informed by theorists who argue that social, political and cultural context is imperative to the analysis of what body art reveals about the experience of subjectivity (A. Jones 1). Susan Bordo, for example, asserts that the body is a powerful symbolic form and site upon which cultural rules, hierarchies and metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed (90) and Amelia Jones insists that the body/self cannot be understood outside of its cultural representation (29). Victoria Pitts, similarly, posits the body as a site for constructing identity (9). What these theorists make clear is that tattooed women cannot be considered the sole authors of the meanings placed upon their bodies (Pitts 82). Rather, body projects are ways through which individuals negotiate relationships between cultural narratives and their own bodies (Pitts 35).

To think of it another way, contemporary scholarship on tattooing practices in Western societies indicates that tattoos are powerful symbols for displaying affiliation and identity (DeMello 12; Sanders and Vail 6). In this way, Mun et al. profess that tattoos hold multivalent meanings for bearers, including such notions as connection to self (sense of self), life events, relationships and spirituality (134). Similarly, Charles Taliaferro and Mark Odden indicate that while tattoos may be the result of an individual walking into a tattoo studio and selecting an image from sheet designs available at that time (commonly referred to as flash tattoos), it is more likely that tattoos have significant meaning to the bearers (10). Thorsten Botz-Bornstein,

likewise, argues that tattooed skin functions as a wall upon which numerous thoughts and beliefs are inscribed; hence, tattoos are considered graffiti marked on flesh (53). In this sense, tattooees, I argue, corporeally perform auto/biographical scripts through the tattoos they chose to mark their bodies with. Notably, such embodied narratives are often simultaneously stories about one's self and others in that the tattoo bearers' life stories are intrinsically entwined with broader social, cultural and political discourses.

In my mind, theories of embodiment and identity performance are interwoven with feminist body theories. That said, for structural ease, I attempt to unravel this intricacy here in order to lay the foundation of my theoretical framework. To begin, I deconstruct Cartesian ideas, thereby tracing the legacy of binary concepts separating mind and body as different facets of personhood that have infiltrated contemporary Western thought systems. This discussion makes clear the significance of feminist body theories in examining women's tattoos as markers of spirituality. I next explore the concept of identity performance to theorize ways in which the skin is implicated in the dynamic process of subjectivity. Here, I align with Mindy Fenske who argues that women's tattooed bodies expose numerous discourses "seeking to control the meaning of the body" (54), including social inscription, history, materiality and expressive subjectivity (Fenske 53). This position draws upon Judith Butler's notion of *performativity*, that claims identity not as a single act, but rather as a continual process involving the repetition of a set of norms (Butler xxi). In this sense, I understand the body as a space whereupon social, political and cultural discourses are inscribed but also a space where identity is constructed through choices tattoo bearers make, both in the ways they mark their flesh and in the ways such marks are then performed. For example, the ways that women cover or expose their flesh in order to hide or

reveal tattoos is, in my mind, a conscious performance of identity. As an example, one participant, Scotia who is a Pagan woman conceals her tattoos at her self-described conservative work place whilst, conversely, another participant, Sheila, intentionally had the head of a snake tattoo wind onto her hand in order to invite conversation (see figure 3.2).

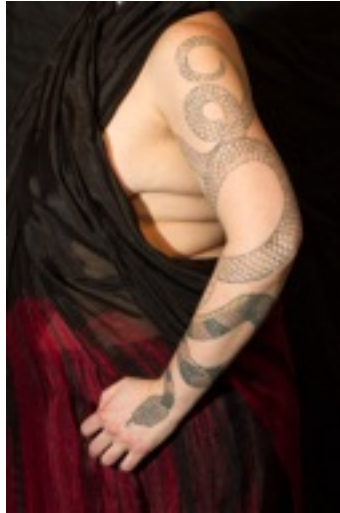


Figure 3.2: Sheila displaying the work-in-progress snake tattoos winding from her left shoulder onto her left hand. Photo credit: Gina Snooks.

Finally, I theorize tattoos as performance art; here, I understand performance as a conscious enactment of life stories wherein the tattooee's body is thought of as the stage or canvas. Indeed, these concepts position the body as a project and as Sonja Modesti argues, tattooing as an “act of symbolic creativity, a performance of the self” (209).

In all, I conceptualize ways in which inked flesh functions as a medium of culture (Bordo 90; Botz-Bornstein 53; Spry 93; Mun et al. 137), whereby women shape and reshape the representation of their life narratives through tattooing performances. Hence, I make theoretical

links between ways in which the dissemination of knowledge influences the regulation of identity. Moreover, I postulate that such links are foundational to understanding ways in which subjectivity is performed vis-à-vis cultural, political and social discourses. My analysis follows Amelia Jones' argument that body art is neither inherently critical nor inherently reactionary, but instead suggest that it provides an opening for the possibility of engagements that can radically transform ways that meaning and subjectivity are thought of (14). Body art, therefore, encourages interrogation of the politics of visibility and the structures within which subjectivity is located (A. Jones 23). Indeed, from this stance, I contend that spiritual tattoos provide a platform through which to better understand women's experiences with regard to spiritual practices.

3.2 The Mark of Descartes: Locating *Woman* Within the Flesh

As markers of spirituality tattoos inherently disrupt binary concepts of mind and body as separate and separable aspects of self (Coffey 5; Falkenstern 97). In the process, I suggest that tattoos trouble dominant dualist world views indebted to the legacies of Western philosophical thought, notably Cartesian philosophies. In fact, when René Descartes said “Cogito, ergo sum” or “I think, therefore I am” he was declaring that he knew only one thing with certainty: that he was a thinking thing (72). He did not know with equal certainty, as Carol P. Christ informs us, that he had a body, nor that his body was sitting in a chair or that he wrote words with a quill pen (72). Rather, Descartes insisted “I am therefore precisely nothing but a thinking thing; that is a mind, or intellect, or understanding, or reason...” (19). More precisely, in *Meditation Two: Concerning the Nature of the Human Mind: That it is Better Known Than the Body*, Descartes' claims that the mind is separate from the body. He goes on to say:

[f]or since I now know that even bodies are not, properly speaking, perceived by senses or by the faculty of imagination, but by the intellect alone, and that they are not perceived through their being touched or seen, but only through their being understood, I manifestly know that nothing can be perceived more easily and more evidently than my own mind (23).²

In other words, Cartesian philosophy proposes that the self and, by extension, the soul are defined by the mind (Christ 72). Thus, the soul and body become separate (Descartes 4; Bordo 93; Arp xv; Mercury 25). In short, Descartes' postulates that the human soul is not at all corporeal because its only purpose is to think (Bordo 26). Indeed, as Susan Bordo posits "[t]he spiritual and the corporeal are now two distinct substances which share no qualities...and are defined in opposition to the other" (Bordo 99). The self, in this iteration, is thought of as essentially a rational and disembodied subject that is not significantly affected by its body, nor its feelings, relationships, or histories (Plaskow and Christ 173).

To be clear, dualistic thought runs deeper than Cartesian theories; however, it is only with Descartes, as Susan Bordo indicates, that the mind and body come to be thought of as mutually exclusive (93). In this sense, although Aristotle and Plato held that the soul permeated the living body and was only able to escape it upon death, it is with Descartes that body and soul become distinct substances (Bordo 93). Cartesian thought, therefore, proposes that spiritual and physical unity are impossible (Bordo 78) and that the body, thus, is disconnected from God (Bordo 94).

Furthermore, it is through Cartesian philosophy that nature became disassociated from divinity and thereby defined by its lack of affiliation with spirit (Bordo 102). Equally important,

² I work with the translation of Donald C. Cress. For more more information see my work cited section.

then, is the role Cartesian philosophy played and, in fact, continues to play in the regulation of women's bodies based upon notions that women's bodies were/are associated with nature/emotion whereas men's bodies were/are associated with mind/reason (Coffey 4-5). Indeed, as Susan Bordo argues in *The Flight To Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism & Culture* (1987), Cartesian views mark the "historical flight from the feminine, from the memory of union with the material world, and a rejection of all values associated with it" (9). Hence, it is with Descartes' ideas that women's bodies in particular become the image of imperfection and corruption (Christ 99). Cartesian rationalism, in this sense, reinforces notions of bodies as being ungodly, particularly the bodies of women. Consequently, traditional religions with ties to Cartesian philosophies have constructed false dichotomies wherein male bodies and the knowledge produced by men have, historically, been valued above female bodies and the theological knowledge produced by women. In this way, women have been largely excluded from theology. Carol P. Christ adds that symbols of God as a dominant male contribute to the campaigns to control women's bodies (228); thus, she argues that re-imaging symbols is imperative to restructuring systems in order to dismantle gender-based hierarchies, at least with regard to spiritual practices (228).

On that note, although Descartes knew nothing but that he was a thinking and immaterial thing, by contrast, tattooed women know for certain that they have—in fact they are—bodies. Indeed, as I will explore in greater detail in later chapters, by marking their flesh with spiritual tattoos women who participated in this study make the statement that spirituality is embodied and that mind, body and spirit are entwined aspects of the same entity. In this sense, by tattooing my skin with the statement "I (th)ink, therefore, I am." in a way that disturbs the work "think" by

placing brackets around the letters “th,” I simultaneously unsettle Cartesian rationalism that permeates the social, cultural and political discourses written upon my flesh, whilst creating a sacred text that summarizes my spiritual philosophy. By this I mean that my “I (th)ink, therefore I am.” tattoo is an affirmation of my belief that spirituality is holistic and, thus, mind, body and spirit are not distinct aspects of the same self, but rather are co-constitutive.

To that end, underpinning the central focus of my thesis is the question: what is a tattoo without the flesh within which it has been inscribed? Is it anything more than a sprawling glob of ink unable to take form or an idea with no hope of manifestation? Indeed, can a tattoo exist separately from the body? By posing such theoretical inquiries what I wish to make clear is that the bearer’s body is not merely a platform from which to display tattoos. Rather, I argue that the skin is implicated in the dynamic performance enacted through the mingling of flesh and ink. In this sense, I imagine that women’s spiritually-inspired tattoos symbolize the interconnectedness of mind, body and spirit.

3.3 (th)inking Through Identity Performance

To think through the ways in which spiritual tattoos communicate the gendered experience of everyday life (Fenske 7), I theorize ways in which lived experience is inscribed upon the surfaces of bodies and ways in which identity is actively produced. In particular, here, I am concerned with identity as a constructed performance. Hence, my conceptual analysis is informed by theories concerned with the performative self, which overturn Cartesian modes of thinking precisely because, within this analysis, body, mind and spirit are not thought of as separate vessels (A. Jones 39). It is in this way that I conceptualize tattoos through a feminist phenomenological lens because, as Amelia Jones writes, “phenomenology interprets and

produces the self as embodied, performative, and intersubjective” (39). A phenomenological framework, therefore, offers a platform through which to interrogate lived experience (A. Jones 38; Fielding 282), thereby providing me an ideal conceptual lens through which to explore body art as a form of embodied life narrative.

Indeed, as Helen A. Fielding indicates, feminist phenomenology offers a critical lens through which to investigate embodied experience precisely because a feminist approach questions the roots of phenomenological thought that initially universalized lived encounters exclusively through the experience of European, able-bodied, male subjectivity (281). That is to say, feminist phenomenological theories, while influenced by phenomenological theories broadly speaking, are unique in the ways they understand subjectivity as a diverse entanglement of multifaceted identity markers, including but not limited to gender, ethnicity and religion. To be clear, entanglement, in my usage, means the intrinsic connectedness of multiple facets of subjectivity. Notably, then, my feminist phenomenological framework is indebted to the legacies both of French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir whose proposal that “one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one” (267) permeates through contemporary feminist theories, and of Erving Goffman who posited that the self is a performed character (qtd. in A. Jones 39). In short, I understand Beauvoir’s assertion to mean that “woman” is a socially constructed concept wherein the subject embodies a set of socially-contrived and culturally-accepted behaviours in order to create this concept of woman. In other words, to become a woman the subject must perform the role ascribed by specific social, cultural and political expectations and, equally important, she must continue to replicate this performance in order to maintain the character. Meanwhile, Goffman indicates that such performances are inextricably tied to the situation in which the

performances take place (22). Hence, in my interpretation, Goffman makes conceptual connections between identity performance and performance in a theatrical sense through his allegations that selfhood is enacted in a manner akin to that of a staged performance produced for an audience (61).

In other words, selfhood is a continuous and flexible process that is, in many ways, performed in relation to the actor's cultural, social and political location. For this reason, I posit that body work practices are inextricably connected to social, cultural and historical forces, which are negotiated through ideas of gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality and place (Coffey 7). To think of it another way, bodies are not produced outside of history, as Elizabeth Grosz asserts (148), thereby claiming that modes of self-production and self-observation entwine individuals in various networks of power; however, those networks never render one merely passive (144). In this way, my conceptual analysis aligns with that of Claire Craighead who understands "the skin, the surface of the body, as an evolving canvas" (48); having said that I wish to make clear, as Craighead does, that the body is not devoid of social and cultural scripts (44).

Building upon these frameworks, my conceptual analysis is informed by the ideas of feminist philosopher Judith Butler whose theories of gender as a performed social construction provide a lens through which to conceptualize ways that cultural meanings are scripted upon bodies. In particular, I am interested in Butler's question of "the materiality of the body to the performance of gender" (xi), which I extend to include subjectivity more broadly speaking.

Particularly useful for grappling with this question is Judith Butler's theory of performativity, through which she indicates that gender (and other aspects of identity, I suggest)

is not a single act but a series of repetitive gestures and ritual performances (xv): in other words subjectivity is a production. Subjectivity is, therefore, not specifically biological but rather a continual series of enacted activities that either adhere to or, conversely, oppose the norms of social communities. That said, to claim that the subject is produced through cultural, social and political discourse is not to do away with the subject (Butler xvii). Instead through this lens I assert that the subject at the nexus of these networks is one that can be positively described in terms of their actions in, with or against these specific forces. Simply stated, I claim that lived experiences are intrinsically entwined with the structures that construct those particular experiences. Thus, the ways in which women's subjectivity is marked by the tattoos embedded within their flesh is not separable from the cultural mores inscribed upon bodies, even when those chosen marks are intended to stand in contrast to such ideologies.

Notably, Butler's performativity theory has its philosophical roots in Simone de Beauvoir's reconsideration of existential, phenomenological and psychoanalytic critiques of Cartesian theories (Butler 482). Significantly, Beauvoir's ideas were shaped by mid-century critics of Cartesian theories of the divided and disembodied self who instead propose "theories of subjectivity as embodied, intersubjective, and contingent upon self/other relations," notably Jean Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Lacan, as Jayne Wark writes (125).

In Butler's own argument, she points to Foucault and Nietzsche who explain that the body is thought of as a space upon which cultural values emerge — a blank page in and of itself (2008, 177). Butler further proposes that:

[t]he body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and violence. The body can be agency and the instrument

of all these as well, or the site of “doing” and “being done to” become equivocal. Although we struggle for the rights over our bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. (21)

Butler’s argument here, in my interpretation, emphasizes the complexity of the relationships between tattoo bearers and our bodies. On the one hand, she is clearly conceptually marking the body as a medium of cultural discourse while acknowledging, on the other hand, that subjectivity is simultaneously self-produced through individual body performances. What Butler makes explicit is that the materiality or natural aspects of the body are not denied, but are instead taken into consideration alongside social, cultural and political discourses that inform the construction of subjectivities (483). Tattooing one’s flesh, in this way, is a conscious act of “doing” self-formation and self-regulation that intrinsically disrupts the notion of “being done to” with regard to discourse being written upon the flesh by others. Indeed, what tattooed bodies do, according to Christine Braunberger, is write “back to the larger culture through their tattoos” (20).

That said, following Butler’s proposal that our bodies are never quite our own, tattoo bearers never fully escape being exposed by the gaze and interpretation of others. This is precisely because the ways in which subjectivity is experienced is constructed vis-à-vis intersubjective relationships between self and others which are immersed within broader social, cultural and political discourses. The corporeal experience of the intersubjective self is thus not created in isolation but is rather made into being via the ideas, thoughts and beliefs that others inscribe upon the flesh of others. With regard to tattooing practices, more indicatively, Mindy Fenske alleges that the “contemporary image of the tattooed body cites the meaning of the past at the same time as it participates in creating and potentially altering history” (6). It is, therefore,

plausible for the bodies of tattoo bearers to be categorically assigned meaning that does not align with the bearers' own perceptions of selfhood, precisely because as Clinton R. Sanders and D. Angus Vail observe, people often use appearance to place others in specific categories (1). For this reason, I theorize that tattoos are performative auto/biographical stories, thereby stressing the continual production of self-narratives as an on-going and evolving process.

It is noteworthy to mention that Butler rejects a direct correlation between her concept of performativity and performance as a cultural form, arguing instead, in her foundational book *Bodies That Matter*, that it is a mistake to reduce the theoretical concept of performativity to performance (178). In response, Jayne Wark suggests that questions of subjectivity and agency lie at the heart of this distinction between performance and performativity (126-127), but points out that Elin Diamond posits that performance culture “is the site upon which performativity is materialized” (qtd. in Wark 126). My position aligns with that of Diamond; consequently, in my usage, performative storytelling³ is theoretically informed by Butler's ideas on performativity, yet moves beyond it to consider performativity and performance as mutually constitutive of the body, and the ink embedded within it, being the site of performance.

Further taking up the subject of tattooing practices as markers of self-production and identity as a continuous process, Rachel C. Falkenstern questions the common conception that tattoos are permanent by arguing that neither the bearer's body nor their sense of self is fixed (98). Instead, she argues “both are part of the same continually changing process, inextricably linked an in a reciprocal relationship with one another:” (98). Tattoos, in this way, are part of the

³ I use the term performative storytelling to imply a narrative in action; that is to say, a story that is performed. See my methodologies chapter for a more details.

bearers' bodies, and thus, do not exist separately from those bodies because if the ink were outside the flesh it would then exist as something entirely different (Falkenstern 99). Thus, following Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Falkenstern postulates that human beings come into existence, develop and interact with our environments as embodied beings; by this she means that the world shapes human experience as much as we shape the world (99). In other words, as Victoria Pitts explains, identities are produced intersubjectively in space and time (84).

To be clear, within this theoretical framework, the term “intersubjectivity” simply stated means shared understanding (Anderson np). Theoretically speaking, intersubjectivity, in my usage, refers to the ways in which personal knowledge and understanding is constituted within relation to broader, more complex, systems of knowledge such as cultural, social and political discourses that give personal experience meaning. Nick Crossley, more eloquently, describes intersubjectivity as “a system of interlocking perspectives” (viii) that form “the fabric of our social becoming” (173). Importantly, Crossley strategically uses the word “becoming” to make his point that the world — socially speaking — is in continual process in relation to these systems of multiple interconnecting perspectives (173).

Conceptualizing tattooing practices in this way — through performativity and intersubjectivity theories — makes clear that tattoos are not permanent because the body itself is not static, as Rachel C. Falkenstern posits (34). Moreover, as I have argued, the socially situated meanings inscribed upon and/or interpreted through bodies cannot be considered fixed or univocal.

3.4 Scripting Skins: Theorizing Tattoos as Performance Art

Nicolas Michaud theorizes that tattoos are performance art because the body is a canvas that constantly moves and changes (34). More to the point, he argues that tattoos move beyond the category of *visual* art into *performance* art because the body (the tattoo bearer) is an essential aspect of the presentation of artwork (34). The term body art, in this sense, takes on multiple meanings; first as art located on the body (flesh as a canvas) and second as art performed on and through the body (skin as a stage). I, likewise, situate tattooing practices in the realm of performance art. However, I would argue that performance art and visual art are intrinsically entwined. Indeed, by theorizing tattoos as auto/biographical performances I make obvious links between the artist/narrator and the visual and material performance of tattoo stories. My position further draws upon Richard Schechner's explanation that questions of embodiment, action, behaviour and agency are central in performance studies (3), which are central also in my study of women's tattoos as markers of spirituality.

As a starting point, I understand performance art to mean works wherein an aspect of performative self display are incorporated (Wark 10). Simply stated, performance art is an "art of actions" as Kristine Stiles claims (qtd. in Wark 31). Beyond that, Jayne Wark explains that in performance art "both performer and viewer are acting subjects who exchange and negotiate meaning" (31). Conceptually, according to Cristina Nuñez, performance art is based on the relationship between the artist's mind and body in collaboration with those of the spectator (102). Nuñez's medium of choice is the photographic self-portrait which, in my mind, represents selfhood in a similar way that tattoos communicate identity; that is to say, as a performance. To think of it another way, Richard Schechner proposes that performance studies (an interdisciplinary field with ties to theatre studies, cultural studies, feminist studies, anthropology

and sociology to name a few) is primarily concerned with relationships; theorists, therefore, ask how a performance *interacts* with those who view it and how the performance changes over time (3). Marvin Carlson, similarly, posits that “[p]erformance implies not just doing or even re-doing, but a self-consciousness about doing and re-doing on the part of both performers and spectators...” (ix). By this I mean that the performance of scripts — in this case scripted skins — enact the uncertainty of the present moment focus of the performance itself. Performance art, in this sense, emphasizes experimental and shared ways of knowing, partly because what happens when you perform something is that you enact the ‘same thing’ in a unique position and in relation to audiences and conditions that partly determine the performance, and which are ephemeral. Hence, only the meanings last, and those too can shift and be altered, as I argue throughout this thesis with regard to tattooing practices. Indeed, it is with these points in mind that I make correlations between tattoos as performance art and the concept of performativity as contrived by Judith Butler wherein selfhood is understood to constitute a series of repeated actions. On that note, since the argument that tattoos are experienced by both performer and audience underpins my theoretical framework, it is my contention that tattooing practices are, in fact, performance art. Inked flesh, after all, tells stories “...of the intimate relationship between a tattooed subject and her or his embodied experience” (Lee 152).

Furthermore, performance theories are integral to my analysis because such ideas inherently situate narrative, particularly personal narrative experiences, and auto/biography as a platform from which to engage everyday politics (Wark 31); specifically, in this thesis, the everyday politics of spiritual practice for women. From this perspective, I weave together performance art theories and corporeal feminist theories to form the conceptual framework of

this thesis in order to interpret women's spiritual tattoos as personal narratives entangled with broader social, cultural and political discourses. Simply stated, spiritually-inspired tattoos tell stories of women's experiences concerning their personal devotional practices in the same way that various other forms of body adornment communicate ideas about the wearer's belief systems. One participant, Sarah, indicated that the pentacle tattooed on her shoulder symbolizes her Wiccan belief system and, in her words, "represents who I am now, it represents who I am going to be for the rest of my life." That is to say, for Sarah, the pentacle signifies that she currently identifies as a practicing Wiccan and she expects to remain devoted to that spiritual faith.

I begin to explore women's spiritually-inspired tattoos in more depth in the next chapter. More specifically, I consider the ways in which some women mark their flesh with spiritually-inspired tattoos in order to manifest ideas that emerge from and are intricately connected to their lived experiences of spirituality, however one might define such concepts.

Chapter 4: Scared Flesh: An Analysis of Spiritually-Inspired Tattoos

I have stood, cold and alone, at the centre of Stonehenge, my feet firmly planted upon an earth engulfed in mist, pouring rain soaking through to my bones, while I offered prayers to the spirits of this place. I have left footprints where my grandmothers and their mothers before them once walked, tracing the stories they left upon the lands I call home. I remember their names and I honour their ways. I have stood, also, at the edge of rocky beaches and sensed the energy of place merging with my own. Silently and aloud, I have spoken: by the earth below me, by the sky above me, by the sea that surrounds me, I have come unto my Gods...This is my spirituality. These are my stories written upon my flesh.

When women tell their own stories of spirituality they tell stories that come from deep within and, as Jo-Anne Elder writes, these stories come from everything around (xxi). For some women, experiences of healing and empowerment are central to their own stories of spirituality, says Elder and she points out that such stories are a part of these women's life journeys (xiii). Guided by feminist perspectives, in this chapter, I explore some of those stories. Broadly speaking, I examine the ways in which personal and collective spiritual practices shape the daily lives (Lara and Facio 12) of women who have chosen spiritually-inspired tattoos and how such embodied experiences are expressed through tattoos. In this way, the potential of stories to change consciousness (Klassen 116) is also an integral aspect of storytelling practices for women.

I demonstrate that women's spiritually-inspired tattoos symbolize the interwoven — and pliable —relationship between mind, body and spirit (or soul).⁴ Further, I theorize that some women manifest what is most sacred to them by marking their flesh with spiritually-inspired tattoos. By this I mean that women's spiritually-inspired tattoos function in two central ways: first, tattoos function as marks of self-expression; and second, I propose that inked flesh offers a way to display personal manifestos or mantras. That is to say, for some women, tattoos are personal statements that guide the tattooee's behaviour. In this context, I propose that such tattoos are spiritual manifestos or mantras precisely because the messages that the bearer wishes to communicate through such tattoos emerge from and are inseparable from women's own experiences of spirituality. In other words, it is the tattoo bearers themselves who define their body art as spiritually-inspired tattoos. To be clear, I specifically explore the experiences of women who have voluntarily chosen to engage in tattooing practices as a way to mark their flesh with spiritually-inspired tattoos. Significantly, my approach to this topic emerges from feminist discourse and is contextualized through auto/biographical experiences. For this reason, I do not take up the topic of tattooing from a historical perspective or delve into connection between spirituality and tattooing in a more broad sense. In short, I am specifically interested in women's own life stories as told through their tattoos.

In this chapter, I explore the notion of self-expression. Then, in the next chapter, I take up the idea of tattoos as personal manifestos. However, since tattoos are embodied life narratives, as I argue throughout this thesis, such concepts — tattoos as forms of self expression and tattoos as personal manifestos — are intimately connected.

I use the terms spirit and soul interchangeably in this thesis.

Notably, these themes of tattooing as acts of self-expression and of self-formation align with contemporary scholarship that understands the body as a canvas (Michaud 35; Craighead 43) and tattoos as artwork that depicts self-identity (Mun et al. 134; Sanders and Vail 1; Atkinson 4). Building upon this, in this thesis, I agree with Maureen Mercury who posits that tattoos are manifestations of the soul's need for expression (1). As Jeanette Rodríguez observes, "spirituality contains our deepest beliefs and thoughts" (qtd. in Elenes 44). Indeed, C. Alejandra Elenes proposes that "spirituality is linked to a person's core" (44). To be clear, I do not claim that all women experience spirituality in this manner, nor do I suggest that having a spiritual belief system is the only way through which one might understand their innermost thoughts. Having said that, as I explore in this chapter, several women in this study think of spirituality as connected to the core of their sense of selfhood. In brief, I contend that my participants understand spirituality as a part of their life journey. Tattoos, as Dane proclaimed are "like a passport book, [like] of an avid traveller, you have your stamps, you know, you've been here, you've been here" (Woodland). Thus, I argue that spiritually-inspired tattoos are stories about the bearer's life experiences as understood through and shaped by their experiences of spirituality.

Beyond that, Winnie Tomm says that the aim of a spiritual path is to increase a person's mindfulness of everyday experiences (Introduction). Her position aligns with that of Dorothy Louise Abrams who states that "[i]n any journey we begin with ourselves where we are, who we understand ourselves to be, and how we believe we connect to the beings around us. In truth, we cannot begin anywhere else" (7). I propose, then, that spiritually-inspired tattoos represent not only the ideas that tattooees have about themselves and others but, also, mark journeys of self-exploration. Self-expression and self-exploration are, therefore, entwined in this context.

Spirituality, in my usage, is a complex concept. Indeed, spirituality means different things to different participants, even when those participants share similar life experiences.

In this thesis, I do not take the term spirituality to be interchangeable with the word religion. Religion, as Tomm observes, is often concerned with otherworldly salvation and generally assumed to refer exclusively to dominant religions of the world (Tomm Introduction).

Spirituality, by contrast, can be understood as a personal relationship with *something* beyond the individual. Most participants define that “something” as a divine entity. Helen makes this point clear; in her words, “I don’t necessarily believe there’s one thing. I believe there’s something but I don’t know what I believe in specifically. Like, I believe there’s something bigger than us but I don’t know what I believe in specifically” (Mugford). For this reason, she does not identify with any specific spiritual path.

Beyond that, Laura Pérez proposes that “spirituality is a conscious, self-reflective way of life and a way of relating to others, to ourselves and to ‘s/Spirit’” (qtd. in Facio and Lara 2014, 4); by this she means some sacred being. Beverly Lanzetta, similarly, explains that spirit refers to “the force of divine breath, animation, or presence” and thus “we can think of spirituality as the all-pervading divine energy and seamless web of oneness intimate to life itself” (28). Further, she writes that spirituality is not something that occurs beyond the body, as implied by certain mystical traditions such as Christianity, but is actually an experience weaving together mind and heart, body and soul, inner and outer life (29). One participant, Lori, who is a Pagan, similarly stated “for me the divine is everything but it’s also me as being a component of that everything” (Savory). Following this line of thought, I understand spirit to mean some divine entity or energy force that is separate from, yet interconnected with the individual self and, thus,

something that unites all life. Spirituality, in this way, refers to the personal belief systems that make sense of an individual's relationship with self and *something* beyond that self.

Consequently, how one interprets spirituality informs the systems of belief that shape personal and collective everyday life experiences, as Elisa Facio and Irene Lara explain (12), at least for some people. Spiritual frameworks, therefore, may include but are not limited to sacred mythologies and personal experience narratives underpinning esoteric cosmologies. Winnie Tomm, correspondingly, postulates that situating our social consciousness in a network of interconnectedness is the primary focus of spirituality (Introduction). Speaking specifically with regard to contemporary Pagan belief systems Margo DeMello asserts that “most share a similar worldview that includes living in harmony with nature; revering the earth and its creatures; believing in many gods (polytheism)...” (146).

Beyond that, in this thesis, participants define spirituality for themselves in various ways. Sarah, for example, who describes herself as a Green Witch, believes in the existence of a God and Goddess whose roles are complementary in order to maintain balance in the world. Spirituality in her experience is “related very much to the Aboriginal spirituality idea of Shamanism where everything is sacred, everything should be protected and cared for” (Tremblett). Further, when I asked if her concept of God and Goddess was polytheistic or if she believed in only one God and one Goddess, she stated that in her understanding divinity is polytheistic. Ruth, on the other hand, who had herself tattooed in order to signify her relationship with the monotheistic Christian God when she was a devout Evangelical Christian, asserts that the rose tattoo on her arm (see Photograph 4.1) expressed her belief that despite the trials she experiences in this lifetime, in the end none of those ordeals would matter because “...you get to

spend eternity in heaven with God and everything's just perfect all the time.” Ruth chose this tattoo because she was convinced that her belief in God could not be altered. Now, however, she identifies as an atheist and no longer believes in God or the Christian concept of heaven. As such, Ruth’s tattoos no longer represent her spirituality but remain meaningful, nonetheless.



Figure 4.1: A rose and tribal design intended to signify Ruth's relationship with the Christian God. It reads: "everlasting promise." Photo credit: Gina Snooks.

In a similar vein, the words of Zaren, a self-identified atheist who does not adhere to belief in divinity but who nevertheless understands her tattoos to be spiritually inspired both adds interest to my analysis and complicates my understanding of spirituality. On that point, Zaren explains that her tattoos represent her lived experiences as well as her life philosophy, which includes belief in the interconnectedness of life. Spirituality, as she explains it is a term used to describe:

some sort of feeling when it's not associated with any sort of organized religion. And so what could that mean? Well it could mean spiritual experiences could be the feeling you get when you look at flower and you realize how perfect it is. It could be

the connection you feel to non-human life. Like the connection I feel with animals that is so powerful and I feel like it goes beyond “me protector/you pet, me owner/you possession” and like this feeling of mutual respect and reverence I have for animals that is so strong and it’s been so strong my whole life. (White)

In this sense, Zaren’s position is similar to Scotia’s, a Wiccan, who claims that “we’re all connected to everything, everything is connected. We’re connected to our past, what we do now connects to our future.” Scotia expresses this belief through a Celtic Tree of Life tattoo located on her arm, a tattoo that I discuss in greater detail below. Likewise, C. Alejandra Elenes proposes that spirituality is about the way one connects with the world, including with one’s ancestors and descendants as well as contemporary relationships (Elenes 43). For this reason, Elenes alleges that spirituality is more than one’s relationship with the Divine, God or a Creator; rather she stresses that spirituality is about the way an individual (or a community) understands their position in the world (Elenes 44). What is significant, here, is that all participants in this study, with the exception of Ruth, indicated that connectedness to something beyond the self was central to their concept of spirituality, whether they understood that “something beyond” as a sense of divinity or a relationship with the earth’s non-human inhabitants. Equally important, participants revealed that they express these concepts of spirituality through their tattooing practices, as I explore more thoroughly later in this chapter.

Theoretically, then, such belief systems guide individual life choices and influence one’s actions toward others, including the earth’s non-human inhabitants. This is because participants on the whole experience themselves as part of a greater web of consciousness. As such, presumably one’s actions toward others also affect the self. In a broad sense, spirituality, as

Meredith McGuire explains “...consists of how people make sense of their world — the stories out of which they live” (qtd. in Espín 2014, 105). Moreover McGuire elaborates that spirituality “engages individuals through concrete practices that involve bodies as well as minds and spirits” (qtd. in Espín 105). Following that, Olivia M. Espín claims spirituality is embodied (105); thus spirituality has a profound “materiality” (105). With these points in mind, Espín connects feminism and spirituality and, therefore, claims that for some women spirituality is “a center from which to challenge structures of power and privilege, particularly as they affect women” (108). Importantly, this weaving together of feminism and spirituality is central to the practices of several women in this study, myself included. In this way, the words “I (th)ink, therefore I am.” inked into my flesh are simultaneously a feminist statement challenging Cartesian mind and body separation and a proclamation of my spirituality, which I understand as an embodied experience and believe to be inseparable from my feminism. In much the same way, referring to the tattoo on her foot (Figure 4.2), Lori, who is a Pagan and a feminist, explained that the tiger lily is, all at once, a symbol that represented her affiliation with her belly dance troupe, The Neighbourhood Strays, and a mark of feminine strength which she associates with the goddess Lilith. The tattoo, thus, reminds her that:

...you [speaking to herself] walk on the earth that Lilith walked on in a spiritual as well as physical sense [GS: uhum] you are not willing to be confined by other people you know by the male or by the expectations of society [GS: uhum] you know and so, again, for me it was this is something of what I believe.

As she makes clear, Lori's tiger lily tattoo functions to express numerous overlapping aspects of her identity which she understands to be inseparable from her feminism and her spirituality.

As I have demonstrated, the concept of spirituality cannot be confined by narrow definitions, precisely because spirituality is centrally focused on ways in which human beings interact with the world around them, including other sentient beings.

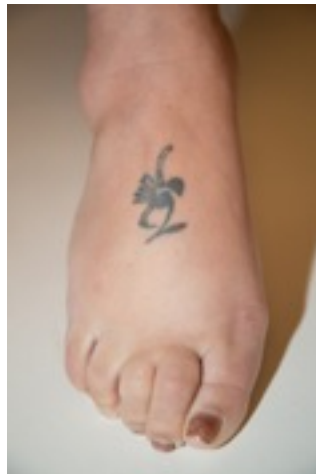


Figure 4.2: Lori, former member of The Neighbourhood Strays belly dance troupe and former co-owner of the Wild Lily Dance Centre displays a lily tattoo on her foot that symbolizes both her association with the dance troupe and her connection with feminine divinity. Photo credit: Gina Snooks.

Moreover, spirituality, for some, refers to the relationship that an individual has with divinity, by whatever name that person understands the Divine. Having said that, I do not wish to suggest that anything and everything counts as spirituality; rather, following the insights my participants shared with me, I contend that spirituality is defined by personal lived experience. In other words, spirituality is a phenomenal experience. Based upon participants' own experience, spirituality means being connected to *something* beyond the self. That is to say, spirituality is about being in relationship with life forces — sometimes believed to be divine and sometimes not — and living in harmony with such entities as best one can. Indeed, spirituality, as William

James asserts “shall mean for us the *feelings, acts and experiences*” of individuals “so far as they stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (36)⁵. For this reason, participants in this study share similar ideas about their experiences of spirituality through tattooing practices, even when participants do not define spirituality by the same terminology.

Not surprisingly, these themes of interconnectedness, living in harmony with nature and all sentient beings and, for some, relationships with divinity are repeatedly expressed by women who see their tattoos as signifiers of their spiritual practices. For this reason, tattoo bearers often draw images from personal experience as well as from popular spiritual iconography. These images may include pentagrams or a tree of life, as indicated previously, but may also include abstract designs.

Women were also likely to identify generic images to which they had assigned personal meaning as spiritually-inspired tattoos. This point is significant because it means that women are marking their flesh with designs that are not easily interpreted by others as spiritually-inspired tattoos; as such, women are openly yet simultaneously cryptically professing their spiritual beliefs. Body art, in this way, tends to be polysemic; that is to say, tattoo bearers often assign multiple meanings to their ink. This point is evident in the discussion above regarding Lori’s tiger lily tattoo, a mark that simultaneously symbolizes feminine divinity and commemorates her affiliation to a belly dance troupe of which she was once a member. In her own words:

the lily connection for me was as much a part of that symbol as it was my daughter
[she had contemplated naming her daughter Lily] and the feminine strength that is

⁵ James uses the term religion in his description. For a full discussion see his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902*.

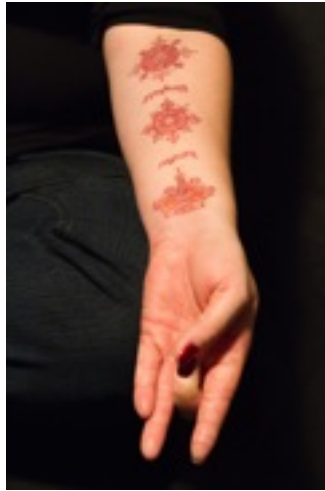
association with the lily and the Neighbourhood Strays symbol. To me, like I said, it had to mean something to me and Lilith is very much a part of that meaning as everything else. (Savory)

In this sense, this specific tattoo speaks also of the importance of belly dancing as a medium of performative auto/biographical storytelling through which Lori expressed her lived experiences, including her ideas about spirituality. More explicitly, through dance she expressed her belief that body and soul are connected. In her words:

[T]he other thing for me is [that] my dance — the physical movement and the connection to music — is something that brings me to a very spiritual place and headspace. And so for me it's always — even if what I am trying to express is not necessarily something that has to do with my spirituality — because I'm not always dancing about my connecting to the universe; most often I'm not. I'm expressing some other idea or, you know, telling some other story, but that movement and that, that's connected to music, which, again, I think is another very spiritual thing for me, and that brings me to a place of greater connection — greater understanding — my headspace changes. (Savory)

On that note, Lori commented that her tattoos “emerge from my soul” and said, “it's like my soul coming out and expressing itself” (Savory). For this reason Lori's tattoos (both the tiger lily and her second tattoo, which I discuss in the next chapter) are spiritually inspired and, at the same time, function to tell, seemingly mundane, life stories. What Lori reveals through the stories she chose to share with me, however, is that body and mind and spirit are interwoven and inseparable in her experience.

With this in mind, I propose that women use their spiritually-inspired tattoos to suggest that human beings are connected to *something* beyond the self. Akin to that, Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ suggest that women are connected to divinity through their bodies (Plaskow and Christ 95). Related to this, Plaskow and Christ posit that a more body-centred approach to spirituality is emerging within feminist theology than previously existed within traditional dualist thinking (Plaskow and Christ 95). Such body-centred approaches to spirituality are not intended to uphold binaries used to justify social, political and cultural hierarchies. On the contrary, as Chris Klassen indicates, feminist spiritualities work to disrupt these same systems and also posit that the stories that emerge from such experiences offer a way to change consciousness (116). To think of it another way, it is reasonable for women to understand their bodies as sacred rather than profane precisely because women are understood to be connected to divinity. In this sense, my participants' responses are indicative of broad understandings of spirituality that link human beings, through their bodies, with the divine. As Scotia says, "we are connected to everything." Indeed, when Jaime describes the intricate artwork on her arm (Figure 4.3), she says that the dots "symbolize something similar to the oneness of all things..." (O'Leary).



4.3 Jaime's arm piece which she says is intended to look like henna depicting intricate mandalas, Photo credit: Gina Snooks

Leela Fernandes explains that spirituality can also be about practices of compassion, love, ethics and truth defined in non-religious terms (10). My participant, Karen, likewise, says that in her understanding spirituality is “that whole sense of belief in love — belief in living.” By this she means love in a grand metaphysical sense, not in a romantic manner. She expresses this belief through her only tattoo. This tattoo features a common phrase, “Live, Love, Laugh” (Figure 4.4), to express intimate ideas she has about the way the universe works and her place within that sphere.

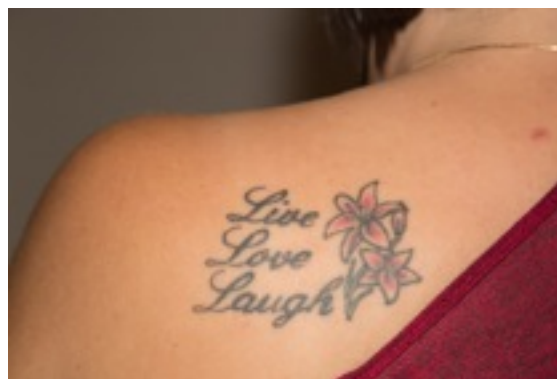


Figure 4.4: Karen who has the phrase “Live, Love, Laugh” tattooed on to her back as a symbol of her life philosophies. Photo credit: Gina Snooks.

Furthermore, following Fernandes' understanding of spirituality explains how one of my participants, Zaren, who identifies as an atheist, can think of her tattoos as being spiritually inspired and how others can think of themselves as spiritual people even though they do not follow a specific faith. As Zaren explained, "although I'm not a religious person and I actually consider myself an atheist, I've drawn a lot on different spiritual models for growth and my own healing through hard times and I've really drawn on different things including ideas of, like, flux and balance and these sort of themes" (White). More specifically, she indicated that her life philosophies are significantly influenced by Zen Buddhism and that she expresses these philosophies through her tattoos. Equally intriguing, Dane described spirituality as a feeling; more specifically:

spirituality is that sense of peace, that sense of calming, relief, satisfaction, um, any sort of positive adjective that I can throw in there basically that is derived from the relationships we have and the interactions that we have, and experiences that we have. (Woodward)

Jessica, who said she is still trying to figure out exactly what spirituality means to her, said spirituality is about letting go of her ego; that is to say, getting out of her head and trusting her intuition instead of being governed solely by her analytical mind. As she states:

I'm a crazy over-thinker and that puts me in a dark place a lot of the time, so I find it — I find I need to find reminders of ways to navigate out of that dark space and listening to my intuition — that peace, I find, is the best positive way to do that, for sure. (Patlan)

She then went on to clarify that intuition is something she feels in her body, which she finds difficult to put into words. Presumably, what Jessica means by this is that intuition is a system of knowledge that is sensed, thus experienced through the body. Put another way, for Jessica, spirituality is about trusting and listening to her gut feeling, not only in a figurative sense but also in a physical sense. As an example, Jessica's thigh is marked with the words: "When I open my body I breathe in light," which is how she misheard the lyrics from the song "Broken Crown" by the British folkrock band Mumford & Sons.⁶ The lyrics are actually: "When I open my body I breathe a lie"; however, Jessica chose to tattoo the words as she first misunderstood them because these words best represent how she understands her spirituality, which is fundamentally about feeling at peace with herself and her surroundings. In her words, "[the words] remind me of the sacred space, like, kind of in my mind, you know, when I am quiet I can find that peace, you know, and I think that's how they would relate to the sacredness of my body" (Patlan). What I take Jessica's point to mean is that body and mind and spirit are inseparable in her experience. More explicitly, Jessica explains that for her spirituality is holistic, thereby implying the interconnectedness of body, mind and spirit as inseparable aspects of the same self. Beyond that, for Jessica, tattooing is a medium through which to express her ideas and, equally significant, her tattoos function as self-reminders that her goal is to act in ways that align with her core beliefs, such as practicing gratitude, for example.

Following Mindy Fenske who asserts that the tattooed body makes obvious "the

⁶ I was unable to photograph the tattoo on Jessica's thigh because she was wearing full length pants. Also, she chose not to have a tattoo on her back photographed because she did not want to share the image with others, despite sharing the story about it with me.

performativity of the materiality of the body” (55), I propose that spiritually-inspired tattoos highlight women’s lived experiences of spirituality. In short, by inking their flesh with spiritually-inspired body art, women are actively engaged in the process of writing their own stories about their spiritual experiences. In this way, I argue that some of the women who participated in this study mark their spirituality within the context of their everyday lives. In doing so, these women express the innermost intimate beliefs they have about themselves and the world around them and, consequently, shape — and perform — their own identities based upon such concepts.

I cannot say when she became real to me — this Goddess — it seemed as though I had always known her. I had known her in the land, I had felt her when the rain fell upon my face, I heard her silent voice as it was carried by the winds, on the Canadian prairies and near the Atlantic sea. At first, I found her in a book and it was as though she had been there all along, waiting to be remembered. Although I did not yet know her name, I wanted to remember her.

As Winnie Tomm pointed out, the most obvious reason for sharing my own spiritual experiences is that they inform my consciousness (Introduction). Undeniably, as I have previously stated, my experiences as a woman who practices a feminist, goddess-centred spirituality also inform my analysis in this thesis, whether or not that is my intention. To that point, I conceptualize spirituality as an embodied experience that has been shaped not only by personal experience but also by social, cultural and political influences. In this sense, my own

experience mirrors Margot Alder's proposal that contemporary feminist Pagans view all human concerns as simultaneously spiritual and political, and her claim that the separation between the two is a false dichotomy born of patriarchy (180). Alder further indicates that the splitting of human beings into either "mind" or "bodies" is a false separation unknown before classical times and further, one that makes little sense to Native Americans (180). To be fair, criticisms of these mind/body binary mindsets are not limited to an Indigenous worldview.

The notion of interconnectedness underpins the multifaceted narratives embedded within my own tattoos. In particular, "I (th)ink, therefore I am," a statement marked upon my arm, is an expression of my belief that spirituality is an embodied experience and, equally important, that my spirituality is inseparable from seemingly mundane aspects of life. Hence, in my practice, whilst the personal is political, it is equally true that the political is spiritual and vice versa. For this reason, "I (th)ink, therefore I am." also signifies that my subjectivity as a self-identified woman is connected to the body in which my subjectivity is experienced, including my experiences of spirituality. In this way, I contend that all knowledge is, as Winnie Tomm states, relative to personal experience (ch. 1).

To that point, my spirituality is further shaped by the fact that my life stories, along with my footprints, are scattered across the Canadian prairies; importantly, these stories have been forged by life events, relationships, motherhood, adventures, mishaps, fulfilled dreams and broken hearts, to name a few. All of these experiences contribute to my spirituality because, in my understanding, spirituality is not separable from other facets of life. In this sense, "I (th)ink, therefore I am." marks also my relationship with divinity which is connected through such, seemingly, ordinary life experiences. To think of it in a simpler way, while some may light a

candle with no specific mystical intention, I may understand the flame to signify a connection with *something* or *someone* beyond myself. The act of lighting the candle for me may, therefore, exceed an everyday action and instead manifest a metaphysical action. Spiritually-inspired tattoos, I argue, function in the same way in that it is not specifically how *others* view the tattoos that matters, but rather how the bearers themselves experience their tattoos that is of significance in this context.

Believe and Hope. Words scripted by the pen of my only child. And, etched into my skin. I cannot say that these words, nor the butterfly that accompanies them, are explicitly expressive of my spiritual beliefs, nor can I entirely claim that they are not. I cannot profess that this tattoo, marked upon my upper right arm, was a spiritually-inspired tattoo, nor can I say for certain that it is not. At first, it merely marked a mother's heartbreak — the overwhelming sadness that moves all the way through the body of a woman who feels that she has failed her only son. His dark night of the soul, the darkness into which he had descended, was also my dark night; and my tattoo told that story. If only to a select few. Still, I cannot say that it was not also a marker of spirituality since, for me, there is no separation between my spiritual self and my mundane self. Truth be told, Believe and Hope is many stories. Stories that are shaped and reshaped as the ink ages. Believe and Hope is a mark that signifies entwined life stories, a mark that says 'always believe,' a mark that says 'there is always hope,' a mark that says not only can things change but a reminder that, in fact, they always do. The tattoo was never intended to be part of a healing process, but, in hindsight, it likely was. Perhaps, then, Believe and Hope is the mark of a

wounded warrior or that of a wounded healer — the question is: who remains wounded and who has been healed?

According to John A. Rush, tattoos function symbolically as signifiers through which individuals express their emotions (70). Following this, he claims tattooing practices are potentially therapeutic, both emotionally and physically (70). Margo DeMello makes similar claims, indicating that tattooing practices provide women with a medium to regain control over their lives in times of crisis (173). As DeMello and Mifflin observe, themes of healing, empowerment and reclaiming commonly emerge from women's tattoo narratives (DeMello 172; Mifflin 4).

This concept of tattoos functioning as markers of transformation was expressed by several participants in this study. Zaren, for example, expressed similar sentiments with regard to a tattoo that reads "Such permanence is terrifying" (Figure 4.5). She stated that:

It was January 2009, I was in a deep, deep bad depression and I thought, "I need to do something that feels full of agency, like something that feels like I'm an actor and I can actually do something even though I can't do much else," ... you know, some people may say, "well maybe that's not a good time to go get a tattoo when you're in a deep depression," but, like, 5 years later I'm still pretty happy with it, but it was definitely around, you know, just thinking about — something about putting the words permanence on my body in permanent ink during a time when I wanted to end felt interesting because, you know, I was thinking a lot through ideas of, like, how everything passes and I was really, like, doing a lot of reading around how "this too

shall pass” and ideas that like you know just flux and continuation and knowing that I'm in a really bad place right now, but in a few months I'll be ok and I'll look back on this I'll remember, “wow I felt like this was never going to end,” and I felt that the idea of permanence was interesting there because I was thinking about the only permanent thing you can really do is something like a tattoo. You know, there's not much else that you can really do that's not going to change, so I liked that idea.

(White)



4.5 Zaren “Such permanence is terrifying”
Photo credit: Gina Snooks.

In a like manner, Jaime claimed that becoming tattooed had a cathartic affect. Specifically referring to the arm piece displayed above (Figure 4.3) she said:

the tattoo came at a very odd time because I felt like I was crawling out of my skin sometimes. I needed a change. And, doing that, getting a tattoo — the pain of it, everything, deciding on the symbols, the colour, everything meant that I was deciding something for myself. I was becoming more of who I am.

Such motifs are not surprising given that, as Christ indicates, symbols potentially have profound psychological and political effects (72). Thus, images inked into flesh can affect the bearer in profound ways. Indeed, as Jaime added, after becoming tattooed she experienced a shift in her attitude, which led to new experiences. In her words:

Stuff happened after I got the tattoo as well [GS: Ok]. Um, I, ah [pause] met a Shaman from Africa and participated in ritual with him [tone of voice is excited]. And it was — that was a very transformative, like that had a very transformative effect [GS: uhum]. Um, I went from feeling very angry and resentful to feeling very emotional and open! (O’Leary)

Clearly, Jaime’s story does not suggest that her life changed solely because she got a new tattoo; however, she makes it clear that the act of becoming tattooed was the catalyst for a series of events that had a life-altering impact for her. From a spiritual perspective, writes Winnie Tamm, “our spirits, bodies, and the social and cultural places we live our daily lives are part of an interwoven whole that is made healthy through participation, using spiritual creative energy that is intrinsic to life” (Introduction). In this sense, by expressing her spiritual beliefs, thoughts and experiences through her tattoo, Jaime was able to shape and reshape her life story in life-changing ways.

To that point, as I make clear with my *Believe and Hope* tattoo narrative, it is not necessary for images to be explicitly recognizable as spiritual iconography to be considered spiritually-inspired tattoos, since it is the effect that the image has upon the bearer that is most significant. Examples provided by participants mentioned above, including Lori’s tiger lily, Jessica’s song lyrics and Karen’s commonplace quote demonstrate this as well.

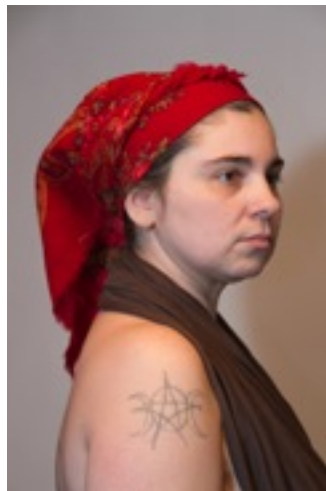
Maureen Mercury takes the concept of wounded healing through tattooing practices a step further by suggesting that tattoos emerge from the bearer's psyche as a result of the body's request for healing (48). For this reason, she claims that the placement of body art is never an arbitrary choice, but rather a response to the tattoo bearer's psychic wounds (50). That is to say, Mercury claims tattooees choose — consciously or otherwise — the placement of their tattoos based upon the type of energy the bearer is attempting to access (50). More explicitly, Mercury makes correlations between the type of energy the tattooee accesses through their chosen location and specific areas of the bearer's life that requires healing (50). In this way, tattoo bearers may be expressing deeply-held beliefs they have about themselves and/or others that are rooted in often traumatic life experiences. In honesty, I cannot say whether I was attempting to heal from past experiences when I chose the placement of either of my tattoos. I can truthfully say, however, that there was never any doubt in my mind as to where the tattoos would be located. As a matter of fact, from the initial decision to mark my flesh I intuitively looked to my right arm and visualized each tattoo manifesting itself on my skin.

My participants, however, offered other explanations, and suggested that placement of tattoos, for them, was a matter of wanting the option to conceal or display the images at will. Indeed, Jaime, Jessica, Zaren, Lori, Scotia, and Karen all suggested that they chose the location of their tattoos precisely because they could cover the ink with clothing if they chose. Sheila, on the other hand, chose to tattoo her entire arm with a snake image that ends on her hand precisely because she wanted to make it difficult to cover the tattoo. She explained that she wanted to elicit conversation from others because she is an introvert and, thus, “not good at small talk” (Coultras). The snake tattoo, in this sense, provides “a way to break the ice because I am also pretty shy in a

lot of ways, believe it or not,” Sheila explained. Beyond concealment or visibility, participants cited aesthetics as integral to choosing where to place tattoos. As such, from either perspective, my participants’ explanations did not seem to support Mercury’s hypothesis. To be fair, though, I had not thought to directly ask if there might be a deeper psychological reason for choosing specific placements. Nevertheless, I continue to contemplate if, in fact, my own tattoo locations were or were not subconsciously chosen.

Here, then, I want to return to Thomas King’s provocative statement: “the truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (122), in order to suggest that stories are not merely a mode of self-expression, but rather are, in fact, the medium through which subjectivity is experienced. By this I mean that tattoos tell the embodied stories about the relationship between the tattoo bearer and their bodies, as Wendy Lynne Lee indicates (156) and those tattoos simultaneously mark the bearer’s experiences within broader social, cultural and political discourses. Shawn Wilson, similarly, proclaims that “relationships do not merely shape reality, they are reality” (7). To think of it another way, as my brother with the dragon tattoo once said, “tattoos are reality” (Snooks). What Marty meant by this is that tattoos mark the reality of our lived experiences. Women’s spiritually-inspired tattoos, in this way, not only tell stories of women’s life experiences but simultaneously acknowledge the significant impact such experiences have had upon each woman’s reality. This point is crucial in this overall discussion precisely because spirituality, in my understanding, is not considered to be separate from secular experiences (Fernandes 9). Hence, personal narratives provide a way to further interrogate ways in which women’s lived experience is shaped by cultural, political and social contexts.

As a prime example, Sheila who is a Pagan and a feminist, explained that female energy has always been a significant part of her life, and that women's issues are very important to her. As she puts it, "I am a woman and I am spiritual and I think it's important to be spiritual — not blindly, but it's an important part of who I am" (Coultras). For this reason, Sheila has chosen to inscribe images that represent feminine divinity upon her flesh (Figure 4.6 below). Thus, located on her upper right arm is a tattoo of two crescent moons on each side of a full moon that sits in the centre. This symbol, in Sheila's interpretation, represents the maiden, mother and crone concept common in women-centred spiritualities and various Pagan theologies, including Wicca which was Sheila's practice at the time. Adding to that, the full moon includes a five-pointed star, thus doubling as a pentagram as well. In all, the image symbolizes Sheila's idea that feminism and spirituality are inseparable in her practice.



4.6 Sheila's Goddess inspired tattoo.
Photo credit: Gina Snooks.

Sheila explained that she chose this tattoo, which was her first tattoo, at a time when she anticipated significant changes in her life; in particular, she was realizing that she wanted to end her marriage because she felt stifled by the life she was living with her husband, what she called

a “straight and narrow” life significantly shaped by his familial ties to Christian ideologies. The tattoo, she explained, was motivated by her renewed commitment to herself. In particular, she said [to herself], “ I am going to express what’s really inside of me on my body and I don’t really care what happens after” (Coultas). As Sheila’s narrative demonstrates, this specific tattoo was a way for her to express her sense of self, which is a complex mingling of various identifications. At the same time, the image represents her connection to divinity.

Adding to that, the act of becoming tattooed for the first time was a transformative experience for Sheila, in part, because the act itself meant that she was challenging social and familial expectations that she felt were constricting her lifestyle. In the process, the act symbolized her renewed commitment to herself which meant she would no longer sacrifice her own values nor limit her lifestyle choices at the expense of pleasing others.

In other words, I argue that Sheila was simultaneously representing the world as she understood it through her spirituality *and* creating the world she wanted by taking control of how she presented herself to that world. To that point, Carol P. Christ insists that “[t]he symbol of Goddess has much to offer women who are struggling to be rid of the ‘powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations’ of devaluation of female power, female body...and heritage that have been engendered by patriarchal religion” (286), which have undoubtedly trickled into other facets of society, as I have argued throughout this thesis.

In many ways, spiritually-inspired tattoos signify the bearers’ conscious efforts to live in harmony with their own belief systems as well as symbolize an interconnectedness among people, the environment, ancestors and the creator of all things (Nicolas et al. qtr. in Ellis 19).

Indeed, this perspective was emphasized by Jaime, Sheila, Scotia and Lori, who all self-identity as Pagan and, perhaps coincidentally, feminist.

To give an example, Scotia, who identifies as Wiccan, proposes that tattoos narrate how one thinks about the world. Tattoos, she says, “are a form of personal expression and [a way of] telling a story about yourself.” Importantly, Wiccan is a term used to refer to a person who practices Wicca, a Pagan spirituality. According to Scott Cunningham, Wicca is a contemporary spiritual practice “with roots in Shamanism and the earliest expressions of reverence of nature. Among its major motifs are: reverence for the Goddess and God; reincarnation; magic, ritual observances of the Full Moon, astronomical and agricultural phenomena...” (2013). As a religious movement, Wicca emerged in Britain in the 1940s and 1950s and was developed largely by Gerald Gardner who claimed to be reviving ancient religious systems practiced in secret since the Stone Age (Klassen 13). As with all spiritual practices, there is no singular or correct interpretation of Wicca; rather there are many diverse practices. Notably, several women in this study currently identify as practitioners of Wicca and several others mention a past affiliation with this spiritual practice. Nevertheless, despite numerous shared experiences, each woman interprets Wicca in her own way. Important also, while Wicca falls under the umbrella of Pagan spiritualities, not all Pagans practice Wicca.

Building upon this, Scotia stated that the Celtic Tree of Life located on her right upper arm symbolizes her belief that various aspects of life are intrinsically entwined. The artwork consists of a circle of Celtic knot work encompassing a tree, its branches turning upward, and a mirror image of its roots pointing downward (Figure 4.7).



Figure 4.7: Scotia's Tree of Life tattoo on her upper right arm signifying an the interconnectedness of all things. Photo credit: Gina Snooks.

The image, Scotia explains, represents her worldview that everything is interconnected:

[the Celtic Tree of Life] symbolizes how we're all connected, everything is connected. We're connected to our past, what we do now connects to our future, we're connected to what happens in Indonesia...Even though not everyone thinks that way, we are one world. So, that's what it really means to me.

Another participant, Sheila, the Pagan feminist cited previously, shares this notion of the Tree of Life as a signifier of spirituality. In Sheila's interpretation, the tattoo, which covers the whole of her back (Figure 4.8), symbolizes being grounded in the earth.

Sheila further explains that the tattoo represents her roots; that is, her spiritual roots as well as her cultural and familial roots. In her words: "the ground is the earth, it's grounding. If you think about it...how important it is to feel close to where you are" (Coultras).



Figure 4.8: Sheila. Tree of Life back tattoo that was inspired by a Tree of Life meditation that Sheila practiced when she was a member of a Wiccan circle. Photo credit: Gina Snooks.

Although both Scotia and Sheila are Pagan, their ideas appear complementary to those espoused in Buddhist philosophy in which, according to Tomm, each individual creates their own reality; however, that reality is integrally entwined with the reality or truth of others (Tomm ch. 1). This point is significant given that numerous participants, among them, Jessica, Dane and Zaren, indicated that their spirituality has been influenced by Buddhism, despite the fact that none identified specifically as Buddhist. Jessica, in particular, says she is still exploring spirituality from different perspectives, but indicated that her ideas are influenced by Buddhism. Dane, meanwhile, who jokingly stated that his spiritual label is “pending,” says Buddhism has been influential in shaping his spiritual identity and philosophical outlook on life. More to the point, he explained:

I've done a lot with mindfulness, um, through Buddhist faith [GS: Yeah], I found that one to have been the most prominently intriguing one for me, thus far. Started to look into some Hinduism more recently, um, and again I'm kind of dabbling into that more — I think I am more closely related with the Buddhist principles, ah, although, I

guess I have this idea in my head of what a practising Buddhist would be like and I don't feel like that's me (chuckling). (Woodward)

Zaren, who, if we recall, identifies as atheist, also said that Buddhism has significantly shaped the way she understands the world. Specifically, she said:

You know, I've always struggled with being too easily upset by things or too emotionally invested in things and I thought I like the idea of reminding myself that there has to be a balance and this ties in with some of my spiritual beliefs as well which we might get into about you know some things that have influenced me from, I guess you could say, Zen Buddhism. (White)

Sarah, who says she is part “Aboriginal and part Newfie,”⁷ shares similar ideas of interconnectedness and indicates that her spirituality is inspired in part by her mixed ancestry. More to the point, she identifies as Wiccan and states that she believes that everything is sacred. In a way, Sarah appears to draw on contemporary Pagan ideologies in order to reclaim a connection to her Aboriginal ancestral roots, roots which she claims were disrupted by colonialism as well as her own family histories. In her words:

I was raised strictly in my Newfie heritage basically, and that's what I know mostly about...when I learned about Wicca and as I start to learn more about it, it just felt

⁷ I use the term *Newfie* here as Sarah does to signify her ancestral connection to the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. I am aware that the term is considered to be derogatory by many Newfoundlanders and Labradorians and I am aware that the term derives from an insult given to Newfoundlanders and Labradorians by US Military personnel and later by Mainland Canadians. However, I have made considerable effort throughout this research project to avoid speaking for my participants, to let their stories emerge in their own voices, as such I use the term exactly as Sarah does. That is not to say I would use the term in any other context nor would I identify myself by this word. That said, it is possible that Sarah has chosen to use the term *Newfie* as an act of reclaiming, unfortunately I had not considered to ask her to clarify her usage. As such, I make no assumptions regarding her usage of the term.

natural for me to be there [GS: Yeah] and now looking back — I was actually speaking to someone at the Spiritual Emporium by my place in Ontario and he even mentioned after I told him, it's like, yeah, that's probably the reason why [GS: uhuh] I was so attracted to Wicca because of my Aboriginal ancestry ... that's the exact reason why, because it's more of a nature based [approach]. (Tremblett)

With this in mind, Sarah has chosen to have her back tattooed with images that represent these emerging spiritual beliefs. One is a pentacle with swirly designs attached and the other is a circle comprised of two koi fish. According to Sarah, this pentacle represents the earth and structure, while the swirls symbolize fluidity and constant change. As she puts it, the design is meant to signify “something that’s ever changing but always the same” (Tremblett). Her second tattoo is comprised of two koi fish forming a circle. One fish, inked in vibrant colours, is meant to appear alive and while the other is a skeleton. For Sarah, this symbol represents the circle of life and death, and balance. It also represents her Zodiac sign, which is Pisces; importantly, all of these ideas are linked to ideas she holds about spirituality (Figure 4.9).

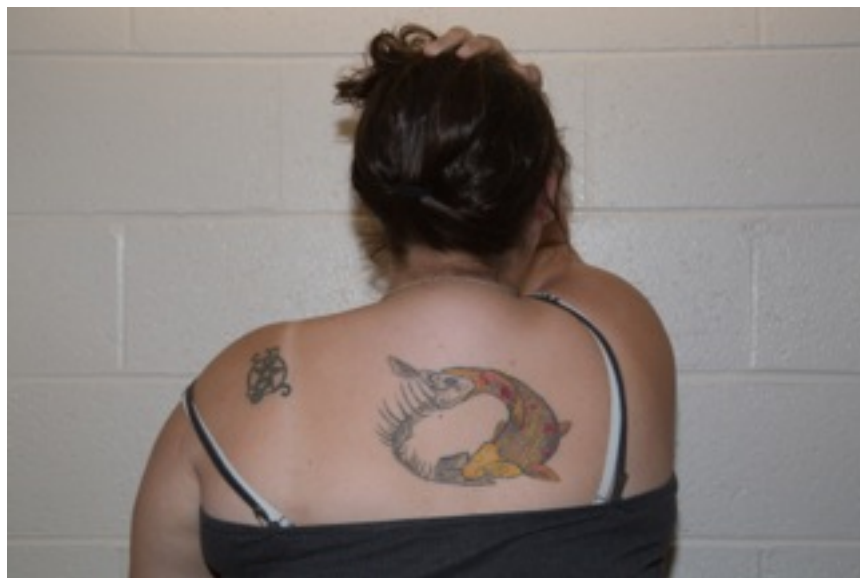


Figure 4.9: Sarah’s back depicting one pentacle tattoo and one half live and half dead fish, which, in part, symbolizes the cycle of life. Photo credit: Gina Snooks.

Lara Medina states that Indigenous⁸ spirituality is rooted in ancestral knowledge and is concerned with healing wounds inflicted “by patriarchal heteronormativity, racism, and capitalism” (2014, 168), presumably inflicted by non-Indigenous systems. In Canada, more specifically, as Sarah’s experiences suggest, such systems are likely to be shaped by the intertwined legacies of colonialism and imperialism. Importantly, in Medina’s perspective, this healing work requires knowledge that is gathered from an integrated mind, body and heart relationship (167). In this sense, Sarah’s tattoo stories can be understood as prime examples of the ways in which personal experiences are informed by broader social, cultural and political discourses.

Having said this, I do not wish to imply that the relationship between personal experience and broader discourses is exclusive to Indigenous spirituality or to Indigenous peoples’ experiences of spirituality. As a matter of fact, I would argue that spiritually-inspired tattoos demonstrate that women’s experiences of spirituality, and, more specifically, how those experiences are written upon women’s bodies, extend far beyond the reach of any specific label. For this reason, women who claim no spiritual labels but who experience spirituality nevertheless may share experiences with women who identify as Pagan, Buddhist and even atheist. To think of it another way, all myths and religious traditions, as John A. Rush posits, point to something beyond the self; that is, some energy or perhaps *spirit* with which everything is connected (141). Following this, I propose that spiritually-inspired tattoos are the corporeal

⁸ I am, again, cautious in my usage of terminology. Here I prefer the term Indigenous rather than Aboriginal because as Taiaike Alfred states the term Aboriginal is a “legal and social construct of the state, and it is disciplined by radicalized violence and economic oppression...” (23). To be clear, I make no judgment against Sarah or anyone else who chooses to identify as Aboriginal, I merely avoid using the term in order to avoid offending those who find the term problematic.

narratives of such personal experiences. I would also take this one step further by arguing that it is not the specific image or text of the tattoo but the stories attached to the artwork that are most significant; that is, the ideas that those narratives communicate about the bearers' senses of self as they entwine with their spiritual practices. In other words, it is the bearers' personal interpretations that matter.

Take, for example, the artwork that Lori has inscribed on her left arm. Lori explains "I wanted it to be significant — something that would be about my life philosophy — not just to tell the world but to remind myself" (Savory). This specific tattoo is a compilation of multiple pieces, including a mermaid emerging from water and the lyrics of song by the Canadian band, Hey Rosetta. The image of the mermaid is drawn from a piece of art by the artist Erté, who was known as a costume designer in the art deco era of the 1920s-30s, and the text was taken from lyrics of the song, "Yer Spring" (Figure 4.10). Lori indicated that the mermaid section of the tattoo expresses multiple aspects of her multifaceted identity. To begin, it acknowledges the



Figure 4.10: Lori's arm tattoo which includes a mermaid emerging from the sea along with the words "Am I the knuckles (sic) white inside? Or am I the water rushing in?" from the song "Yer Spring" by Hey Rosetta. Photo credit: Gina Snooks.

importance of belly dance in her life, in part with regard to costuming because it was inspired by the work of a costume designer. Considering the tattoo's kinaesthetic possibilities, she also gave considerable thought to how the image would be viewed while she was dancing. Significantly, she identifies dance as one medium through which she understands her spirituality, as she explained:

the more connected I became with my body through dance, um, the more, I think, [pause] full my spirituality became. I think I became more connected to the things that I believe and became more connected — not necessarily to practices or rituals but the everyday things that are spiritual for me. (Savory)

To that, Lori added that the more she explores her spirituality the more she sees her physical body as a gateway to her sacred spaces. More explicitly, she professed, “my tattoos are my carvings on the gateway” (Savory). Having said that, she also chose to have the tattoo located on a part of her body that can easily be covered, which she felt was important because she is a lawyer who often makes court appearances and does not want any person's prejudices against tattoos to influence the quality of representation that her clients receive. In other words, she does not want her clients to be judged by her appearance. In the end, she reconciled this concern by reminding herself that she has been practising law and representing her clients diligently for 22 years and that if her colleagues would continue to respect her professionally despite her tattoo. Specifically, she said “I have a good reputation with these people. They know my work. They know how diligent I am they know how knowledgeable I am. They know how professional I am and they know how well I represent my clients” (Savory).

With regard to her spirituality, Lori explained:

the mermaid, in terms of a spiritual thing, like, for me, one of the other spaces that I feel very spiritually connected — um, like when I dance I feel very spiritually connected — when I’m in water. And again, I always think— when I think of our connectedness — I don’t just think of our connectedness to each other on a flat plain, I also think of how connected we are to our millions of years of evolution because, you know, I don’t see them as being separate things; I think evolution was a spiritual process [laughing]. (Savory)

Adding to that, as Lori explained, the words “Am I the knucles [sic] white inside? Or am I the water rushing in?” express her belief that she creates her own reality through the choices she makes. As she puts it, the lyrics inspire her to consider “Do I want to be the force acting in my life or being acted on?” (Savory). In this way Lori’s tattoo functions simultaneously as a marker of self-expression and of self-creation, a point which I develop more fully in the next chapter

As I have argued, tattoos are body art not only because the ink is marked upon the bearer’s body, but also in the sense that tattoos are performance art, thus the body is the site of performance. I reiterate this point here to remind readers that tattoos are dynamic art in which meaning is continually being reinterpreted (Falkenstern 97) and reassigned in relationship to the bearer’s lived experiences. As an example, Lori’s arm tattoo, discussed above, contains a spelling error that ultimately became a part of a larger narrative that reflects her spirituality. As she explained, once the shock and disappointment of having a typographical error tattooed on her arm settled in, Lori realized that the error reminded her to slow down and to be mindful of small details in life. Indeed, she claims:

it kinda goes a little bit to my life philosophy and my spirituality, which we can talk about, but then I realized that in fact that was part of the lesson. And that there were good things about that — there were good significances about that. One was, you know what: you have the things you want but you always have to be mindful, like, don't get so caught up that you forget the details [GS: I love that] [laughing]. First of all, a reminder to take it slow— take a breath [GS: uhuh], you know. You can still be excited and happy but look at the details. (Savory)

The script that says “Am I the knuckles?” rather than “Am I the knuckles?” inspired her to consider, as she put it, the “philosophy that the only thing that is perfect is divinity” (Savory). Further, as she observed, “my tattoo has a flaw, like all of us do, like everything has. Nothing is perfect but that doesn't mean that it's not good, it doesn't mean it's not wonderful. There's a story” (Savory).

In a similar sense, several women revealed that even when their ideas about spirituality shifted, their tattoos inspired by those practices nevertheless remained meaningful. Take for example, Ruth, who I introduced earlier as the woman whose spiritual outlook changed more drastically, from Evangelical Christianity to atheism. As mentioned above, when she was a devout Evangelical Christian, Ruth chose to tattoo a rose with a tribal design on her right forearm in order to signify her relationship with God and the notion of salvation through Christ. At the time, the mark was meant to symbolize that the afterlife — heaven, in the Christian sense — was more important than her earthly experiences, because her goal was to endure life in order to gain entry into heaven. Given her dramatic departure from a faith that considers God (the Father) as the omnipotent divine being, to atheism, which she says means she no longer believes

in God's existence, I asked if she felt any remorse over tattooing her flesh with such symbols. Her response was intriguing "[c]ause it's a part of my past the — being raised as Christian there were a lot of, um, things that I valued just because of the way I was raised, like, forgiveness is something that's very important to me, which might not have been stressed as much if I — didn't grow up in a Christian family." What Ruth meant by this was that despite changing the way she understood divinity and dissolving her relationship with a God she no longer believed in, the values that she acquired through her practice as a Christian remain meaningful to her. Hence, while she no longer adheres to the belief system through which she learned about practicing forgiveness, the concept, nevertheless, remains integral to her sense of identity.

Sheila expressed similar sentiments with regard to the goddess tattoo located on her right shoulder, displayed above (Figure 4.6). Specifically, despite the fact that Sheila is no longer a practicing Wiccan as she was when she first got this tattoo, the mark continues to signify the centrality of feminine divinity. As she says, "I was aware that there was a possibility that my ideas around spirituality might change but this symbol always meant something to me [feminine divinity], you know, once I became aware of it. So, I knew that it would never be something that I would regret..." In this way, Sheila's tattooing practices confirm Carol P. Christ's proposal that Goddess symbols honour the body of the Goddess and, by extension, resacralize the female body (165). Moreover, Sheila, indicated that the Tree of Life tattoo that covers the whole of her back also holds significant symbolism that does not waver, as she puts it:

it's the kind of spirituality, like, even if the values and the words and the mythologies don't fit anymore, it is so based in how the world works and how the energies work that it doesn't really change, it's just the stories that go along with it do. (Coultas)

In this chapter, I have sought to explore the relationship between women's understandings of spirituality and their tattooing practices. My participants' tattoo stories demonstrate that women mark their flesh with tattoos as a way of expressing their most intimate thoughts, beliefs and life experience (Arp xiv). I have demonstrated that women's spiritually-inspired tattoos reveal that while women's ideas about spirituality may shift — in the same sense that other identity performances do — their tattoos tend to remain meaningful. Perhaps this is because the performative self is, as Amelia Jones indicates, derived from the whole of a person's lived experience, which does not transcend the body but is, in fact, experienced within it (39). The body, Jones further says, cannot be considered to be an object separate from the self (39). Following this, in my understanding, the self is an embodied, performative and intersubjective experience (A. Jones 39). Women's spiritually-inspired tattoos, therefore, mark the body with signs and symbols that express the interwoven — mind, body and soul — experiences of women. To think of it another way, inked flesh becomes a sacred text symbolizing the ways in which the bearers understand themselves and the world (Christ 48). In this way, I propose that tattoos might be understood as mythologies enshrined in flesh. To be clear, I use the term mythology to mean sacred or spiritual stories. Maureen Mercury, correspondingly, proposes that tattooing practices are among the ways in which modern Western people are infusing their lives with a sense of the sacred (7). More to the point, she claims the body is used by contemporary tattooees as a vehicle to reclaim their connections to the larger cosmology (7), which, I would add, is understood differently by different practitioners, as my participants have demonstrated. Perhaps most importantly, I argue that by creating sacred stories that mark women's personal experiences of spirituality, contemporary tattoo bearers are also shaping the genesis of new

myths. This point is especially evident for women whose spiritual practices reject religious traditions steeped in patriarchy in favour of women-centred spiritualities. I explore this topic in greater detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Dark Nights of the Soul and Spiritually Inspired Tattoos

5.1 Dark Nights: Introduction

A dark night of the soul is not chosen, professes Thomas Moore; rather it is given to you (xv). A dark night, Moore explains, is “like Dante getting sleepy, wandering from his path, mindlessly slipping into a cave. It is like Alice looking at the mirror and then going through it. It is like Odysseus being tossed by stormy waves and Tristan adrift without an oar” (xv). In other words, a dark night is a quest, a journey wherein the seeker often finds themselves thrust into unfamiliar worlds, alone and sometimes feeling abandoned, drowning in painful seas or lost in mysterious realms. At other times, the scene may seem familiar, the wanderer may find themselves immersed within a recurring narrative of uncontrollable chaos, of unavoidable turmoil, encompassed by some mysterious fog, unable to escape. But, a dark night need not be so dramatic. It might, instead, simply come as a feeling, a sense of being slightly off-kilter in the same way that you feel stuck when your feet sink into a mucky bog; you know you want to move forward but your feet just won’t budge. In any case, a dark night is no ordinary adventure; rather a dark night of the soul is spiritual journey. It is a rite of passage, I propose, in which the traveller emerges transformed.

In previous chapters I have asserted that many tattooed women remark that themes of healing, empowerment (DeMello 172 and Mifflin 7) and transformation are central to their tattooing practices. I have argued, also, that women mark their flesh with spiritually-inspired motifs in order to express their most intimate thoughts, beliefs, feelings and experiences (Arp xiv). In this way, I propose, as Maureen Mercury does, that tattoos are the materialization of the soul’s need for expression (1). Building upon these ideas, in this chapter, I



Figure 5.1 Zaren Healey White. Back tattoos, first a stylized butterfly, which was Zaren's first tattoo and second, the text, "Such permanence is terrifying." Notably Zaren thinks of these as separate tattoos, rather than seeing the text as being added to her existing butterfly tattoo. Photo credit: Gina Snooks.

explore ways in which tattoos function as motivators for bearers to act in certain ways and not in others. More explicitly, I propose that, for some women, spiritually-inspired tattoos function as personal manifestos, which often emerge from what I understand to be a dark night of the soul. Adding to that, I claim that such personal declarations function also as mediums of magical thinking for some. To think of it another way, I propose that spiritually-inspired tattoos are akin to affirmations. I explain this in greater detail below.

In this chapter, I first explore the notion of a dark night of the soul in order to conceptually locate such an experience within the context of this thesis. To be clear, my usage of the phrase "dark night of the soul" goes beyond the Christian theological framework from which it derived. Next, I think through those tattoo stories offered by my participants that I interpret as dark nights of the soul, including the personal narratives of Zaren, Jaime and Dane, all of whom describe specific tattoos as markers that tell stories of transformation and healing. For example, in the previous chapter I introduced Zaren's butterfly tattoo and then her text-based tattoo, that

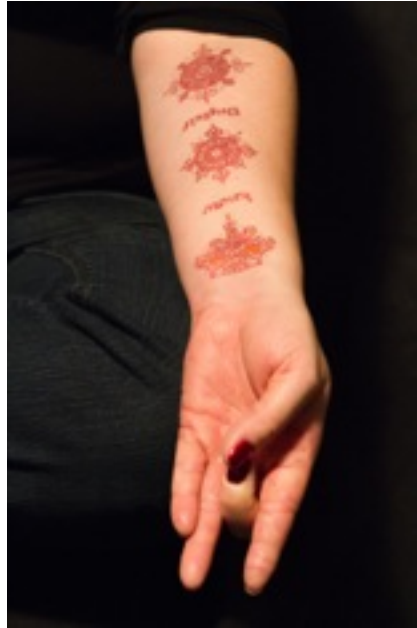


Figure 5.2 Jaime O’Leary “Know ThySelf” tattoo.
Tattoo artist: Lady Lo Custom Tattoos in St. John’s,
NL. Photo credit: Gina Snooks.

reads: “Such permanence is terrifying,” (Figure 5.1) both of which, as she explains, are intrinsically connected to her experiences of depression. In particular, she says that the butterfly, in part, symbolizes “a period of healing and a period of point A to B that I was marking at that time, as a signpost on my little life journey” (White).

Jaime, similarly, indicated that one of her tattoos came at a time when she needed to make a significant change in her life. I refer to this specific tattoo as her “Know ThySelf” tattoo because it includes those words in its intricate design and Jaime explains that “Know ThySelf” was the most significant message that she wished to convey with this tattoo.

As she puts it, “I want to read the ‘Know Thyself’; it’s for me, it’s a message to me, from me. And the owl is not necessarily meant to be looking at them [viewers], it’s meant to be challenging me. Like, ‘Do you know yourself?’” (O’Leary) (Figure 5.2). By this she means that

the tattoo is intended to remind her to act in ways that are reflective of her spiritual belief systems and to

remain true to her own values. Dane, in a like manner, explained that the roman numerals tattooed onto his hips are reminders to act with forgiveness, not only to others but also to himself. As he put it, “for me the forgiveness was not only about forgiving other people but forgiving myself.” I explore this specific tattoo in more depth later in this chapter.

In many ways, as Thomas Moore posits, a dark night makes you question the very meaning of life (xiii). As a result, the experience has the potential to transform the journeyer in fundamental ways. For this reason, Moore encourages his readers to enter into the darkness (xvi). I have, similarly, observed that many women with spiritually-inspired tattoos have embraced that darkness, although some have made such a descent unwillingly and others, perhaps unknowingly. In fact, as I delved into the life stories shared by my participants, I came to better understand my own tattoo story. More precisely, in hindsight, I came to realize that my first tattoo (Figure 5.3) — a butterfly with the words “Believe and Hope” originally drawn by my son when he was 18 and deeply immersed within his own tumultuous life challenges — is, in effect, a mark of my own dark night of the soul.



Figure 5.3. Gina Snooks “Believe and Hope” tattoo. Photo credit: Gina Snooks.

With these points in mind, in the final section of this chapter, I theorize ways in which spiritually-inspired tattoos function as as mediums of magical thinking, including as affirmations. Notably, in this context, I use the term “affirmation” in a manner that does not assume specific religious connotations, or any religious affiliation at all for that matter. I will make these points explicitly clear in the following sections.

5.2 Dark Nights of the Soul

The phrase, “a dark night of the soul,” comes from the 16th century Spanish mystic and poet John of the Cross (1541-1597), who wrote a poem of the same name whilst imprisoned by the Christian religious order of Carmelites, of which he was a member. According to Gerald G. May, in John’s original sense, a dark night of the soul is an ongoing spiritual process (Introduction). Thomas Moore, likewise, proposes that a dark night of the soul is a time of transformation (xvi). To be clear, my understanding of a dark night of the soul aligns with that of May and Moore who both argue that a dark night of the soul is a profound life changing experience (May Introduction; Moore vxi). Hence, Gerald G May and Thomas Moore both argue, a dark night of the soul is more significant than the term is generally used by many in contemporary society to describe all kinds of misfortunes ranging from significant life tragedies to minor disappointments (May Introduction; Moore vxi). Having said that, May’s assertion that some people experience a dark night of the soul and depression simultaneously (ch. 6) is significant here, given that participants in this study make connections between experiences of depression and their tattoos. In a like manner, Moore, claims that to appreciate these depressive episodes as “transformations in the soul, you cannot judge them by any simple, external

measure” (xvii). Instead, he states that one must look deep and close in order to understand the significance of the challenges which one faces. Furthermore, although not the case for participants in this study, Moore makes a point to remind his readers that in real life people often do succumb to their illnesses or commit suicide because they have not found a way to navigate out of the darkness (xvii). All that is to say, depression and a dark night of the soul are intimate and serious experiences which should not be thought of lightly. I would suggest that these experiences are so intimate, in fact, that many people mark their flesh with tattoos in order to reflect upon them.

To be clear, in the sense that John of the Cross intended, a dark night of the soul is not an ominous event, as distressing as the process may be. Following Teresa of Ávila, who was also a member of the order of Carmelites and John’s mentor, a dark night of the soul, in John’s usage, refers to a time when one does not see clearly (May ch. 1). Etymologically, the term “night” emerges from the Latin “*noche*” and “dark” from “*oscura*” (May ch. 1). To expand, the term “dark” connotes mysterious, obscure, cryptic or veiled. For this reason, my usage of the phrase aligns with that of May who asserts that a dark night often occurs in hidden ways and, thus, happens in a manner beyond one’s conscious control (Introduction). The same is arguably true for depression, which may explain why one might experience both simultaneously. Such mysterious experiences, May further posits, are often transformative or liberating (May Introduction). Beyond that, for Teresa and John, the “soul” does not mean something that a person *has*, but rather “who a persona *is*: the essential spiritual nature of human beings,” (May ch. 2). The soul, in Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross’s understanding, is thus not a separate aspect of a person, but rather, as May further explains, the soul is “what you see when you look

at a person with spiritual eyes” (ch. 2). In other words, the soul is one’s innermost intimate self. A dark night of the soul is, therefore, a spiritual journey because the process involves the journeyer questioning the very meaning of existence, a process which potentially sets into motion a significant transformation in the journeyer’s personal life philosophies or understanding of spirituality. It is from this stance that I understand a dark night of the soul to be a spiritual quest. Tattooing practices, in this way, modify “the outermost aspect of a person’s body — the skin” yet as Margo DeMello writes “tattoos are seen as representing the wearer’s innermost self” (151).

Although a dark night of the soul tends to function in mysterious and perhaps even mystical ways, that is not to imply that the process is something that is *done to* a person unknowingly. Indeed, a person who is making their way through a dark night of the soul may actively participate in their own journey through such spiritual practices as prayer, meditation or journaling or by partaking in retreats and seeking spiritual guidance (May ch. 3). I would suggest that tattooing can be understood as another form of journeying.

A final point with regard to a dark night of the soul that I wish to make explicitly clear is that the journey is a continual process. Indeed, Gerald G. May describes dark nights of the soul as endless. More specifically, he claims that “the dark night of the soul is nothing more than our ongoing relationship with divinity” (ch. 4). Thomas Moore, in a similar way, uses the phrase “dark nights of the soul” to indicate that such human struggles are part of the natural rhythms of life (xv) and that most people have gone through several dark nights of the soul (xiv). In this way, I propose, spiritually-inspired tattoos operate as signposts along these personal journeys.

5.3 Participant experiences of a Dark Night of the Soul

Throughout this thesis I have argued, following Clarissa Pinkola Estés, that stories are powerful medicine (14). Indeed, my position builds upon Thomas King's provocative proposal that "the truth about stories is that that's all we are" (2) and Shawn Wilson's claim that "... relationships do not merely shape reality, they *are* reality" (7). With this in mind, it is no wonder that some tattoo bearers understand their ink to be an integral aspect of their ongoing processes of self-creation, healing and transformation.

On that point, my participant Dane, who has struggled with depression for much of his life, explained that several of his tattoos are meant to commemorate his personal experiences of depression. To begin, in 2010 Dane had the words "love is the movement" tattooed onto his right wrist and blue shooting stars with a black starburst onto the left wrist. As he explained, the images were inspired by the logo of a nonprofit organization operating in the United States called "To Write Love on Her Arms." Initially, the organization's founder, Jamie Tworkowski, wanted to help provide a space for his friend Renee Yohe to tell her life story surrounding her experiences struggling with struggling with depression, anxiety, addiction, self-injury and suicidal thoughts.⁹ In Dane's own words:

"To Write Love on Her Arms" was important to me and still is important to me because of how much it supported me. I found it to be very inspiring to kind of keep up with their blog, to be involved in that community, it's — it really, um, it does help to know that you're not the only person going through something, um, and I think a big turning point for me in terms of getting the tattoos even was me being comfortable enough to acknowledge that it was my reality. (Woodward)

⁹ For more information see the "To Write Love on Her Arms" website <http://twloha.com/learn/>.

That is to say, tattooing the phrase “love is the movement” on his wrist was a reminder for Dane that others shared similar life experiences and, thus, that he was not alone in his ordeal. In my interpretation, the tattoos signify to Dane that he is not alone in his dark night of the soul. In fact, Dane also explained that part of the reason he chose his wrists as the location for his first tattoo was because he wanted to cover up the scars that remained from self-harming practices.

Later, Dane was diagnosed with dysthymia, which his therapist described as a form of chronic depression that operates in a rhythmic way wherein the person experiences a continual flux of emotional highs and lows. Although such waves are part of the normal human experience, Dane conveyed that people with dysthymia will experience more severe highs and lows. As a result, a seemingly minor event in the eyes of someone who does not experience dysthymia may manifest as a major depressive episode for someone like Dane who lives with this type of depression. At first, Dane was upset by the diagnosis and by the idea of living with life-long depression. In the end, however, he explained that the diagnosis was “freeing” for him because it enabled him to realize that even though such depressive episodes would likely recur they were no longer something he needed to view as evidence of personal failure or something he needed to conquer. For this reason, he chose to alter the way he perceived such experiences, a process which eventually led to him learning how to better manage his depression and to become more comfortable with it. I would go so far as to suggest that Dane was metaphorically becoming more comfortable in his own skin.

Inspired by this newfound perception, which I suggest emerged from his dark nights of the soul, Dane chose to have the words “this too shall pass” tattooed on his left shoulder blade



Figure 5.4. Dane “this too shall pass” tattooed on his left shoulder blade. Photo credit: Gina Snooks.

(Figure 5.4) as a reminder that nothing lasts forever, not even the most tumultuous life experiences.

Referring specifically to his depression, Dane explained his thought process as follows:

It's probably gonna come back again later on, but you will get a reprieve and that was really reassuring for me because it's like, you know, what I know that I probably am vulnerable to it happening again and me being depressed again and having my life kinda interrupted by it, but I know that it's gonna pass because that's what it has been doing. So, it's kinda — it was kinda of freeing for me to realize, um, that I had some closure in it and that I don't want to say that there were no chances of beating it or eradicating it from my life, um, but kinda accepting that it was always going to be there, um, made it easier for me to manage it and to live with it and become comfortable with it and that was why that was such a big turning point for me, and I think that even the fact that I saw it that way was representative to me of my own

mindset change, because instead of taking that diagnosis, as I said, like, kinda hanging my hat on that to say, “great this is going to be the rest of my life,” I said “Great, this is going to be the rest of my life!” (spoken enthusiastically). (Woodward)

What makes such experiences dark nights of the soul, in addition to episodes of depression, is the transformative effect they have. Thus Dane ultimately altered his life philosophy as a result of his journey. Simply stated, the effects of his journey have been profound. That is to say, not only does Dane (continue to) survive depression, but these experiences shape his outlook on life in deeply philosophical ways. From this, I propose that his depression serves as a sort of spiritual suffering.

The Christian mystic, Teresa of Ávila, similarly contends that spiritual sufferings are experienced “in the very deep and intimate part of the soul” (qtd. in Lanzetta 114). There can be no doubt that the experiences Dane has described have emerged from the depths of his innermost self. Moreover, it is clear that such transformative experiences have been simultaneously healing for Dane. This point is made explicitly obvious with regard to the tattoo that covers the top part of his left arm (Figure 5.5).

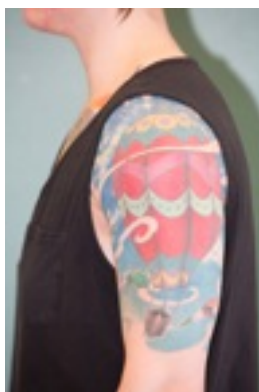


Figure 5.5. Left arm upper sleeve tattoo that Dane explains symbolizes his belief that there is always hope. Photo credit: Gina Snooks.

In his own words, this tattoo ties “into my journey — with my emotional circumstances. I think that that’s something that really shaped me a lot and I do identify as my depression but also the collective experiences that happened while mitigating that situation or that condition”)Woodward). Furthermore, this specific piece of body art is inspired also by the “To Write Love on Her Arms” movement, and more precisely, by the advice that Renee Yohe gave to others living with depression and anxiety as well as those battling addictions and engaging in self-harming practices. Dane further explained that Yohe’s message was about hope and that his tattoo sleeve is also meant to signify the concept of hope. As he puts it, the tattoo prompts him to:

remember that we always have hope. And, so, the stars are symbolic because we have foggy nights when we can't see them — they're always there — same thing when you have a really dismal time in your life just because you can't see hope doesn't mean it's not there, and again that was something that was really important to me to push through the circumstances, so the balloon rises into the stars with the clouds to symbolize that — the existence of hope, um, perpetual existence of hope. Um, at the top of the tattoo the border is puzzle pieces and that is again to represent, quite similarly to the tattoo on my back, that this, again, my life, this is my story, it's still being written, I'm still contributing to it, so the pieces of the puzzle are coming together as I have more and more and more experiences to make me who I am.

(Woodward)

As the photograph above reveals (Figure 5.5), a hot air balloon is the central focus of this particular tattoo and, for Dane, it signifies “the fact that I was rising above what was going

on” (Woodward). To put it simply, on the one hand, Dane’s endlessly evolving tattoo narratives are expressions of his most intimate ideas, thoughts, beliefs and his life experiences and, on the other hand, his body art is part of the process through which he continues to heal from the effects of lifelong depression.

Along those lines, as mentioned above, Jaime has a composite tattoo on her inner left arm that is comprised of five complementary images that make up one large tattoo which extends from her elbow to the wrist of her inner left arm. As she explained, the tattoo, which includes the words “Know ThySelf,” along with three intricate designs, was inspired by mehndi, a form of temporary skin decorating commonly practiced on the Indian sub-continent or by those with cultural ties to places such as India and Pakistan. In my personal experience, mehndi or henna is a dye applied either by professional mehndi artists or women within the same social circle to the hands and feet of women as part of festival adornment; in particular mehndi is an art form used during weddings to decorate the bride. Notably, it was not Jaime’s intention to mimic such life celebrations when she chose these specific designs. Instead, she explained that the tattoo was part of a transformative experience for her. Specifically, she says “I felt like I was crawling out of my skin sometimes. I needed a change. And, doing that, getting a tattoo — the pain of it, everything, deciding on the symbols, the colour, everything meant that I was deciding something for myself. I was becoming more of who I am” (O’Leary). Building upon that she describes her motivation as such:

to “Know ThySelf,” um, I [pause] think is the all of it. To experience, to know exactly who you are. The most fulfilled people are most comfortable in their skin. You, know, they know exactly who they are. And, I didn’t feel like I was in a place

like that at that time. And, so I wanted to kind of get that etched on me so that

[pause] I would remember. And I would always go back to knowing myself.

Knowing what I wanted. Knowing where I wanted to go and where I was. And, it's just something that really solidified that. (O'Leary)

Jaime's narrative, I propose, points to her own dark night of the soul wherein she experienced a time in her life during which she was questioning her sense of self. In other words, Jaime was asking: who am I? In particular, she was questioning her understanding of the world and her belief systems. During this experience Jaime was initiating a transformation in the way she lived her life. That is to say, by marking her flesh with the words "Know ThySelf" along with the symbol of the owl which for her signifies wisdom, Jaime was manifesting a life altering change that emerged from significant contemplation during which she identified what values and ideas were most important to her and then set her intention to act in accordance to those concepts.

On that point, Jaime divulged that during the time leading up to getting her "Know ThySelf" tattoo she was in "in a very negative space and I did very much feel the need to almost moult out of my skin. I felt the need to change somehow and I wasn't sure how to do that" (O'Leary). Further she compared this feeling to that of a snake needing to shed its skin. In her words:

That's exactly what I felt like. I felt a need to shed my skin. [GS: Ok]. And, the only way that I could think to do it, which is a little drastic, is to put a permanent ink [GS: right]—a symbol—on me [GS:yeah] to remind me that when I know myself I will be—I am ok. As I know myself I am ok [GS: uhuh]. And, um, it's in the knowing—it's

being settled with who you are—it's not worrying about other people—it's not worrying about—even about where you think you should be but focusing on right now because right now is all we have [GS: uhum]. So, "Know ThySelf," for me, is more of a [pause]—knowing where I am and where I am going....After I got the tattoo feelings changed from angry to emotional. (O'Leary)

What Jaime makes clear, then, is that this specific tattoo represents a quest of self-discovery that was initiated by a particularly challenging time during which she felt something significant was missing from her life and, thus, she embarked upon a personal mission to uncover what she felt was lacking. Ultimately, her soul-searching led her to realize that in order to be happy and fulfilled, as she wished to be, it was necessary for her to abandon old patterns and, in the process, to be true to her own beliefs, ideas and values. Moreover, this tattoo continues to impact Jaime's behaviour precisely because the message "Know ThySelf" remains significant to her life philosophy. In this sense, the entire process of becoming tattooed with this specific symbol has been both healing and transformative for Jaime.

In this way, the symbolic meaning of this particular tattoo for Jaime "is a part of the process of reality" (Tomm ch. 1). To expand on this idea, Winnie Tomm claims that symbols along with the symbolizer — in this case the tattooees — participate in the creation of reality (ch. 1). From this standpoint, I claim Jaime's "Know ThySelf" tattoo is a symbol that participates in the creation of her reality. The same is true, I argue, of Zaren's "such permanence is terrifying" and butterfly tattoos that signify her continued efforts of healing from depression, and healing and moving forward from what she describes as a "bad relationship." Likewise, Dane's numerous tattoos mark his ongoing quest of surviving depression and anxiety, including the "this

too shall pass” tattoo marking his acceptance of being diagnosed with dysthymia, are symbols that impact his reality in that the tattoos were created in order remind him of the experiences but also as messages to himself that his attitude will impact his experiences.

Another participant, Sheila expressed similar sentiments, particularly pertaining to the Goddess tattoo displayed on her upper right arm (Figure 5.6).



Figure 5.6. Sheila’s “Goddess” tattoo, comprised of two crescent moons alongside a full moon, which symbolizes the maiden, mother, crone, mythology common to Paganism. This tattoo also includes a five-point star, which also makes the full moon a pentagram. Photo credit: Gina Snooks.

In chapter 4, I discussed ways in which this specific tattoo represents feminine divinity for Sheila; here, however, I explore her experience as a dark night of the soul that might be comparable to those of Zaren, Dane and Jaime. Sheila explained that this tattoo, which was her first, was polysemic. First of all, it represented her spirituality and association with feminine divinity. Secondly, she understood the act itself as a means through which she intended to reclaim a part of herself that she felt was being lost as a result of a life. In her words:

In 2000 I was one year married to my ex-husband and, to be perfectly frank I was terrified. I had gotten married really young.... And, to also be perfectly frank, I didn't want to be. My ex-husband was very straight and narrow and I would wake up in a sweat sometimes thinking about how straight and narrow my road had become and how terrified I was of not diverging or changing. And, when I worked with that fellow who did my tattoos [Sheila is referring to a time when she and other artists shared a physical space and operated an artists' collective] and I was like, o.k. this [getting tattooed] is a way of changing how I am seeing myself and my future.... I am going to express what's really inside of me on my body and I don't really care what happens after. (Coultras)

As I understand it, Sheila's first tattoo commemorates a commitment to herself in a similar way as Jaime describes her "Know ThySelf" tattoo. That is say, the act of becoming tattooed was part of a process — a dark night of the soul — during which Sheila worked through personal challenges and in the process made significant life changes in order to transform her world. Moreover, by marking her body with her "Goddess" tattoo Sheila made the conscious choice to proclaim her spiritual beliefs which are integral to her sense of self for others to see, even if others may not agree with or even understand her spirituality. Her claim that she "didn't care" what might happen as a result of her choice refers directly to her marriage which eventually dissolved once Sheila came to terms with the fact that she no longer wished to suppress her most intimate ideas and beliefs or her personal life choices. Thus, in my understanding, this specific tattoo functioned as a catalyst for Sheila's life transformations. On this point, John A. Rush

postulates that “[w]hatever the motive for accentuating the skin, all share common ground, that is, the symbol and its magical power to encapsulate ideas for both display and meditation” (75).

Beyond that, human beings modify the body, Rush contends, for magical, protective and healing purposes (73). Based upon my participants’ tattoo narratives, I am inclined to agree with Rush’s statement. Indeed, Jaime’s “Know ThySelf” tattoo (Figure 5.2, above) and Zaren’s “Butterfly” and “Such permanence is terrifying” tattoos (Figure 5.1, above), along with Sheila’s Goddess tattoo (Figure 5.6, above) and Dane’s numerous tattoos marking his life experience, including those inspired by the “To Write Her Arms With Love” movement, are prime examples of the ways in which tattooees engage in body-altering practices as part of their personal healing processes. As such, despite the fact that Zaren is an atheist and Dane claims that his spiritual label is “pending,” and Jaime and Sheila both self-identify as Pagan, all have experienced personal spiritual quests — dark nights of the soul — and have chosen to mark their bodies with symbols that simultaneously represent those personal journeys as well as function as symbols that actively engage the tattoo bearer in life-altering behaviours. In particular, these diverse symbols operate as motivators to act in specific ways for each tattoo bearer.

To that end, I argue that dark nights of the soul are recognizable by the transformative impact that such experiences have on the life of the tattoo bearer, particularly with regard to each bearer’s existential interpretation of spirituality and lived experience. In other words, through their narratives my participants suggest that the body and mind are intimately connected. Furthermore, their tattooing practices confirm Amelia Jones’ assertion that the body is the ‘expressive space’ through which we experience the world (39) and tattoos are one such medium of expression. Indeed, given that body, mind and spirit are understood to be one continuum, as

Carol P. Christ indicates (135), I propose that it stands to reason that tattoos simultaneously function as tools of healing and transformation as well as modes of self-formation. In particular, as I have demonstrated, such experiences often emerge from the bearers' own dark nights of the soul. Indeed, as I will discuss in more detail in the next section, such practices are intrinsically connected to the act of tattooing a way to mark their bodies with symbols of magic and protection for some women in this thesis.

Understanding Tattoos as Mediums of Magical Thinking

Inspired by Gloria Anzaldúa's provocative statement "you are the shaper of your flesh as well as of your soul" (125), in this section I propose that marking one's flesh with spiritually-inspired tattoos is a form of magical thinking which potentially alters the tattoo bearer's lived experiences. On that note, in my usage, the term "magical thinking" involves the belief that one can influence the course of events in the material world, as Brian Vandenberg asserts, through one's ideas, thoughts, actions, words and use of symbols (806). The notion that one can manifest and alter reality by way of magical thinking is debatable, while some believe in the possibility others do not (Rieti 3). Nevertheless, it is indisputable, argues folklorist Barbara Rieti, that the idea — imagined or real — has the ability to influence behaviour, thoughts and emotions (3). In other words, for those for whom magic plays a role in belief systems, "its power is real" (Vyse 7). Following this, my point here is not whether or not the concept of magical thinking is believable, rather I emphasize that for those who do believe in various forms of magical thinking such beliefs have a measurable effect on their lived experiences. For this reason, I ask readers to set aside any existing prejudices surrounding the controversial term magic and any negative histories associated with the term in order to consider magical thinking as a theoretical concept

in which some tattoo bearers are personally invested. Indeed, such ideas are integral to understandings the auto/biographical narratives embedded within certain tattoos.

To that point, occultist Aleister Crowley wrote that “magic is the science and art of causing change to occur in conformity with will” (qtd. in Curott 23) or as psychologist and mystic Dion Fortune indicated “magic is the art of changing consciousness at will” (qtd. Curott 24). Expanding on these explanations, Phyllis Curott contends that magic is simply the art of changing events in the physical world by accessing heightened consciousness (24). Following these points, in this context, I contend that tattoos function as mediums of magical thinking precisely because the symbols and words marked upon women’s flesh are intended to prompt change in consciousness for the bearers which, in turn, has the potential to manifest material, emotional or psychological change for that tattooee. Magical thinking, as I use the term here, therefore follows Anzaldúa’s claim that “soul and body, words and actions are embodied” (125), aligning with my assertion that mind and body and soul are intimately interwoven aspects of the same self that significantly influence one another. That is to say, based on my participants’ experiences I propose that what one senses in the body is connected to how one feels emotionally as well as how one thinks about certain experiences.

Equally significant, I use the term magical thinking in a way that does not assume adherence to any specific spiritual belief systems. Instead what I wish to convey is that magical thinking is a mode of thinking that is believed to have tangible impacts on one’s lived bodily experiences regardless of spiritual practices. Following Rozin et al., Aleksandra Niemyjska explains that the definition of magical thinking emerges from the two principles of sympathetic magic; first the law of contagion, which implies that once an object is in contact it remains in

contact even in the absence of the object bearer. What this means is that an object retains the essence or energy of a person even in the physical absence of that person. The second principle, which is more relevant to this discussion, is the law of similarity which suggests that an image of an object equals that object (59). In this sense, the ideas and beliefs that bearers symbolically represent in tattoos are equally real as the ideas and concepts themselves are to that tattooee. Further to that, Niemyjska indicates that power of magical thinking lies in the “fact that it constitutes a worldview that provides a way to transcend temporal, spatial, and casual constraints of the objective world” (59). To that point, I consider prayer, affirmations and incantations, as well as meditation and spiritual contemplation, to be sub-categories of magical thinking. Correspondingly, terms such as “spirituality,” “mysticism” and “contemplation,” according to Beverly J. Lanzetta, “are religious terms that refer not only to personal experience, but also to the process of inner life, including prayer, spiritual direction, techniques of contemplation, languages of the sacred, images of the divine, and the commitment of the individual to process growth and transformation” (28). I use Lanzetta’s quotation here to remind readers that each participant experiences spirituality in her own way and, as a result, her spiritually-inspired tattoos are unique representations of those experiences. What I do not wish to imply, however, is that we each have full control over the events that occur in our lives simply by choosing to think a certain way or by enacting certain practices. Simply stated, while magical thinking can and does influence corporeal experiences it does not control all of one’s reality. As an example, the tattoo that reads “I (th)ink, therefore I am.” located on my right arm does indeed function as a medium of magical thinking for me in that simply reading the words numerous times daily provides a constant reminder of my belief that mind and body and soul are connected and that my overall well-being

requires a conscious effort to keep my actions inline with my spiritual beliefs. Further, the mark symbolizes my belief that my thoughts do indeed impact my physical health. The tattoo, however, will not prevent me from ever experiencing negative events in my life simply because I would like to think that nothing harmful will ever happen to me.

In my analysis, the way in which tattoos function as mediums of magical thinking most closely aligns with contemporary theories regarding affirmative thinking such as those proposed by Shakti Gawain (2002) and Louise L. Hay (1999). To that point, Louise L. Hay, in her book *You Can Heal Yourself*, supposes that “what we think about ourselves becomes the truth for us” (13). Notably, I make connections between Hay’s statement and Thomas King’s proposal that “the truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (122), which is the foundation of this thesis. Further to that, Hay argues that we find peace and harmony in our lives once we create it in our minds (13). In this sense, I interpret affirmative thinking — also called affirmations or statements of positive thinking — as magical thinking since the intention is to alter reality for the person who is practicing the affirmations. Shakti Gawain refers to this process as “creative visualization,” and she explains the technique as a process of focusing on a specific idea, feeling or image regularly with positive intention until that desire becomes objective reality (4). This process works, Gawain claims, because the universe is made up of energy (8) and “[a]ll forms of energy are interrelated and can affect one another” (4). Importantly, Gawain states that this process of change does not occur on a superficial level; that is to say, creative visualization — practicing affirmations — requires exploring, discovering and altering one’s deepest, most fundamental attitudes toward life (11). Equally important, in this context, is that although Gawain uses the term creative visualization, the process does not require one to actually mentally

“see” the change they wish to manifest (18). For this reason, magical thinking — by whatever terminology one prefers — depends on the interweaving of mind, body and spirit. Having said that, my understanding of spiritually-inspired tattoos as mediums of magical thinking differs from both Hay and Gawain’s usage of affirmations and creative visualization because these writers do not specifically align such practices with spirituality, whereas I must, precisely because my participants explain these acts of magical thinking as inextricably entwined within their belief systems. This point is clearly demonstrated through the narratives each participant reveals concerning their own tattoos.

As an example, in addition to tattoos already discussed, my participant Dane has marked his right hip with the roman numerals “LXX” and his left hip with the numeral “VII.” These numerals are intended to encourage him to practice forgiveness, both to himself and to others (Figure 5.7). In his own words:

Essentially the story goes that a disciple goes to Jesus and says, “If someone sins against me, um, how many times do I forgive them?” And, [he] tosses out the arbitrary number of 7 times, and Jesus says, “No you need to forgive them 70 times 7 times,” basically meaning, like, you need to forgive and forgive and forgive and forgive and forgive continually because there is always a time when you are going to be asking someone else to forgive you, you will always for the rest of your life need forgiveness at some point or another because we as people are not perfect [GS: Uhum]. And, for me the forgiveness was not only about forgiving other people but forgiving myself. (Woodward)



Figure 5.7. Dane shows his hip tattoos, which read “LXX” on the left and “VII” on the right. These tattoos represent a Christian parable wherein Jesus teaches his disciples about forgiveness. Photo credit: Gina Snooks.

In a way, the message of this tattoo is comparable to the concept of “do unto others as you would have done to you” that is found in spiritual traditions worldwide, including Christianity, which is the source of Dane’s inspiration. I understand these tattoos as affirmations because they are intended to manifest specific behaviours that are intimately connected to Dane’s spiritual beliefs, despite the fact that his label for those belief systems remains undefined.

Jessica, who rejects organized religion but finds inspiration in Buddhist principles, informed me that several of her tattoos are reminders of her personal truth. In her own words, she says, “I’ve been in a head space before where I know that that’s the truth [GS: uhum] and, ah, and yeah, it’s just a nice reminder to get back into that space.” That headspace, according to Jessica, aligns with her approach to spirituality, which includes “an attitude of gratitude” that she learned from her mother. “An attitude of gratitude,” she explained, is a specific mindset wherein she makes a conscious effort to practice gratitude because this way of thinking has a visceral impact on her well-being. This is not to imply that her attitude of gratitude alters the physical world around her, but rather that this way of thinking shifts her approach to circumstances in a way that makes dealing with situations easier to manage. As she puts it:

When I feel a lot of gratitude for things I'm much more easygoing about things and then better things come to me naturally and I think, you know, the law of attraction [GS: Yeah] that's a real thing, right [GS: Yeah]. Um, so yeah, when I'm just in a very positive space life is just so easy, like, you know? (Patlan)

Jessica's "attitude of gratitude" and her reference to "the law of attraction" and "positive space" can be understood as forms of magical thinking because by consciously altering her thoughts Jessica creates a shift in her reality. Two of Jessica's tattoos are intended to motivate this kind of magical thinking for her, and both, incidentally are contemporary rock song lyrics. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Jessica has the words "when I open my body I breathe in light" – inspired by Mumford & Sons "Broken Crown" — tattooed on one of her thighs.¹⁰ Notably, the actual song lyrics are actually "when I open my body I breathe a lie"; however Jessica felt the word "light" was more in line with her beliefs. In addition, tattooed on her left inner arm are the words: "The one who listens to the surf. can feel the pulse beat of the earth" (Figure 5.8), a line from the song "Behind the Sun" by the American rock band Red Hot Chili Peppers. Jessica explained that these words remind her of her spiritual beliefs and that having these specific lyrics tattooed onto her body remind her of those beliefs, in particular her desire to practice gratitude, especially when she is having a difficult time. More to the point she stated:

my thigh one and the one here [Red Hot Chili Peppers lyric on her arm] was [sic] quite spiritual because those are [pause] those are my beliefs [laughing] and I like

¹⁰ Unfortunately, I was unable to photograph this specific tattoo because the clothing Jessica was wearing on the day of the interview covered the tattoo.

having that reminder, um, so that when I'm having an off day, I like being reminded [of] that. (Patlan)



Figure 5.8. Jessica's tattoo depicting lyrics from the Red Hot Chili Peppers song "Behind the Sun." Photo credit: Gina Snooks.

Along those lines, conscious creative visualization, according to Shakti Gawain, is a process whereby one creates positive thoughts and images with the intention of communicating those ideas with our bodies (77). With this in mind, it is clear that the lyrics inscribed upon Jessica's flesh (see figure 5.8) and the roman numerals tattooed onto Dane's hips (figure 5. 7) function as affirmations, which I understand to be a form of magical thinking.

John A. Rush, in a similar sense, argues that "magical thinking gives us hope" (79). Following this line of thought I have come to assert that my "Believe and Hope" (Figure 5.3) tattoo as an affirmation; that is to say, a form of magical thinking. In this sense, this specific tattoo inspires me to meditate on the principles that are embedded in the symbolism. For

example, “Believe and Hope” are words that remind me to act with compassion because the fundamental theories of my spirituality lead me to believe that all human beings deserve to be treated with compassion. Moreover, by marking my flesh with these words along with the image of a butterfly I am making a personal statement that life is a continuous process of change. Coming from this, the tattoo also symbolizes my belief that human beings should not be judged by any single act or sole experience. That is, my tattoo — based on an image created by my son — affirms my belief that everything changes, including people, thus the words believe and hope remind me to hope for the best in situations and to believe that even what I perceive to be extremely difficult situations to deal with will eventually change. In this sense, I contend that my “Believe and Hope” tattoo (Figure 5.3) is similar to Dane’s “this too shall pass” (Figure 5.4) tattoo as well as Zaren’s “Such permanence is terrifying” tattoo (Figure 5.1). Furthermore, this message that everything can and, in fact, does change is significant in terms of the message I wish to communicate to my son with regard to specific life events; in particular this tattoo is meant to remind him that I believe in him and his ability to make life choices that could potentially lead him through his life ordeals, including those he currently faces¹¹ that stem from past actions. Thus, just as Dane’s roman numerals remind him to be gentle not only with others, but also with himself, so too does this tattoo on my body remind me that my story is never only my own. As John A. Rush makes clear, as a statement about one’s self, conceptually a tattoo never represents a single narrative located within a narrow framework (201). Thus, as a magical tool — a mark intended to alter consciousness — tattoos function to manifest numerous ideas,

¹¹ I am intentionally vague surrounding some of the details that inspire the narratives of this specific tattoo because my stories are so intrinsically entwined with my son’s life stories and I respect that his stories are not mine to tell.

thoughts and beliefs that the bearers have about themselves and the way the world operates in a broader sense. As a result, such shifts in consciousness manifest material changes in the bearers' lives.

Scotia, one of the Pagan, feminist women introduced in the previous chapter, provides another example of the ways in which tattoos function as mediums of magical thinking. More specifically Scotia has a symbol that she describes as a “magical sigil,” which is a symbol believed to have magical power, tattooed on her wrist (Figure 5.9). This particular image — a stylized rose that looks much like a red spiral with a drop of water coming from the stem — is an emblem that marks Scotia's spiritual path, a form of Wicca that she practices as a personal tradition and also teaches to her children.



Figure 5.9. Scotia's “magical sigil” that she designed to represent her personal Wiccan tradition. Photo credit: Gina Snooks.

Scotia explained that she visualized the image during a meditation specifically aimed at connecting with her ancestors and her familial and cultural roots. With this in mind, Scotia says that the water drop symbolizes her English ancestry and connection to the sea. In her own words:

First of all I use it as a sigil for my spiritual path. It's a rose — a stylized rose — the red spiral piece is the rose and that part is obvious [chuckling] — the stem, and you can see there's a drop of water coming off it. And, in my meditation — there was this particular meditation that I was doing that had to do with your blood, like what's your bloodline, I guess. And it was an exploratory thing and you were sort of going back in time to connect with your ancestors — your roots. And, I remember — it was crazy meditation — I, like, remember it felt like it was taking forever [chuckles] to travel back and everything was just zooming and then I came to this cave and I had to go into this cave and there was a voice talking to me and but it wouldn't reveal itself, wouldn't show itself, but there was this rose suspended in the air above this rock and there was water dripping from it and I was, like, well what does that mean? And they wouldn't tell me [chuckling] and it wasn't until a later meditation that I figured out, well, it has to do with the sea and it has to do with our English ancestry.

As she makes clear, Scotia has used meditation techniques to access an alternative state of consciousness in order to access information in symbolic form, which she later interpreted to be a message about connections between her ancestry and familial histories and her spiritual practices. Emerging from this experience her stylized rose tattoo is a signifier that, in part, represents her spiritual belief systems. Furthermore, this specific spiritually-inspired tattoo is a medium of magical thinking precisely because in Scotia's understanding the symbol is a link between her inner most intimate self and her outer physical world.

On that note, meditation is, according to Swami Rama, “a technique used for resting the mind and attaining a state of consciousness that is totally different from the normal waking state

(np). Rama asserts that mediation is not aligned with any religions, but is instead a science wherein one accesses the centre of consciousness within. This centre of consciousness, I propose, is the aspect of the self that I have defined as the soul or spirit throughout this thesis. For this reason, Scotia, along with tattoo bearers who have different spiritual belief systems, can all utilized this form of magical thinking as part of their tattooing practices. To think of it another way, spiritually-inspired tattoos, I propose, are mediums through which participants in this study, such as Jessica, Dane, Scotia and myself, can practice a form of mindful meditation with the intention of altering lived experience by way of shifting consciousness. Significant also, mindful meditation, as Barbara Miller Fishman explains, closely fits “with our postmodern way of thinking in which reality becomes multifaceted, the self is composed of many and diverse parts, and knowledge shifts across time and context” (5). In this sense, magical thinking and tattooing practices as described by my participants in this thesis operate in the same manner.

Magical thinking, whether it be in the form of meditation or affirmative thinking, as I demonstrate in this chapter, is an altered stated of consciousness that has the potential to manifest different realities in tangible and corporeal ways for those who engage in such practices. The same, I argue, is true for bearers who embrace tattooing practices as methods of healing. Combined, magical thinking and tattooing practices provide a powerful tool for personal transformation, as my participants in this study have made explicit through their tattoo narratives, precisely because as markers of spirituality tattoos function as personal manifestos that simultaneously signify the bearer’s most intimate ideas and beliefs while, at the same time, serve as a way to initiate transformation through altered consciousness. Given these points, I claim that magical thinking can be a beneficial tool for those who are attempting to navigate their

way through dark nights of the soul, which in themselves are spiritual quests during which the journeyer engages in deep and meaningful analysis of topics such as the meaning of life and one's existence. Simply put, during a dark night of the soul the journeyers engage in conversation with their own soul and/or with divinity, as they understand it. The result, for some, is life altering. Notably, as Thomas Moore indicates, dark nights of the soul are reoccurring events throughout one's lifetime (xiv) and for some, as I have made explicit here, such events go hand-in-hand with experiences of depression. To that end, as many of my participants have made clear, spiritually-inspired tattoos are personal statements chosen by the tattoo bearers to mark their ongoing journeys of personal growth, healing and transformation.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

For many women, marking their flesh with symbols that are emblematic of personal belief systems is an important act of self expression, thus, as my research participant Sheila aptly says, tattooing practices are “an important way of showing what’s on the inside” (Coultras). To put it another way, it is my contention that tattooing practices can reveal the imitate details of women’s subjectivity. For this reason, for women who engage in tattooing practices, inked flesh can play a significant role in the creation and continual performance of selfhood. More specifically, I have argued that spiritually-inspired tattoos can be understood as profound expressions about the bearers’ most intimate ideas, beliefs, experiences and their pasts, as I have argued throughout this thesis (Arp xiv; see also Vail and Sanders 1; Mun et al. 134; Pitts 14). In short, I assert that spiritually-inspired tattoos are auto/biographical performances wherein the tattoo bearer engages in a performative telling of the self; which, in this context, is representative of the bearer’s spiritual belief systems.

For this reason, my in-depth analysis of women’s spiritually-inspired tattoos offers readers a way to better understand how women experience contemporary spirituality, because the body, I argue, is a space upon which subjectivity is performed vis-à-vis cultural, social and political discourses. As I have noted, themes of embodiment and identity performance have been integral to my analysis. Consequently, these conceptual frameworks inform my interpretation of women’s spiritually-inspired tattoos as communicative devices that emblemize the most intimate ideas that the tattoo bearers have about themselves and others (Pitts 14).

What my research makes clear is that a tattoo is never merely what it appears to be (Mifflin 82; Lee 152), rather inked flesh is performative. What this means, as Wendy Lynne Lee

proposes, is that a tattoo *does* something — as she writes, “it tells an important story” (153). Women’s spiritually-inspired tattoos, in this context, tell deeply meaningful stories about the ways in which my participants’ experience spirituality. More precisely, based on my participants’ tattooing narratives, what I wish to make clear is that spirituality is an embodied experience that for some women is intrinsically connected to their tattooing practices. In the process, I claim that tattoos implicate the skin in the corporeal performance of the ever changing self while, at the same time, mark the materiality of tattooed women’s lived experience with regard to spirituality. Indeed, this point is obvious despite the diverse ways in which participants in this study understand and practice spirituality. Thus, as examples, Zaren who is an atheist and Jaime who is Pagan and Dane who describes his spiritual label as “pending” all share similar experiences of spirituality that inherently disrupt the Cartesian mind-body dualisms. Correspondingly, what the tattooing practices of each of these three participants, as well as others in this study, reveal is that spiritually-inspired tattoos mark the intimate connections between mind and body and soul as inseparable aspects of the same self (Coffey 5). The veracity of my argument is demonstrated by Jessica’s narrative regarding her favourite tattoo — a text-based mark that says “when I open my body I breathe in light” — inspired by the Mumford and Sons song “Broken Crown” — that she explains is a mark that represents her holistic approach to spirituality. Since I interpret holistic spirituality to mean that body, mind and spirit are not separate aspects of the same self, I take Jessica’s point to mean that her tattoo is an auto/biographical narrative that challenges the binary hierarchies of mind and body as understood through a Cartesian lens. This, I argue, is in addition to her tattoos functioning as personal statements that remind Jessica of her values and philosophies.

Adding to that, my research on women's tattoos has led me to make obvious connections between spiritually-inspired tattoos and acts of mindfulness, contemplation and meditation. More precisely, participants' tattooing practices illuminate that some women ink their flesh with spiritually-inspired tattoos as a way to focus their awareness to the centre of their most intimate selves. In doing so, bearers of spiritually-inspired tattoos make clear that inked flesh functions as a medium of magical thinking wherein the bearer potentially manifests material change in their lives as a result of contemplating or meditating on the ideas they have embedded within the symbolism of their tattoos. Jaime's "Know ThySelf" tattoo, which she understands as a mantra reminding her to be true to her sense of self, is a prime example of this type of affirmative thinking. This approach to tattooing practices is equally conducive to altering one's reality even when the significance of the tattoo may seem cryptic to others. This is the case with Lori's text-based tattoo that is inspired by the lyrics of the song "Yer Spring" by the Canadian folk-rock band Hey Rosetta which reads "Am I the knuckles [sic] white or the water rushing in?" and my own text-based tattoo that reads "I (th)ink, therefore I am.," which I considered to be a sacred text because it marks my flesh with a statement that summarizes my spiritual belief that mind, body and soul are intimately entwined. To that end, I think of spiritually-inspired tattoos in a manner similar to Lori who proposes that tattoos are akin to the sacred script that adorns the doorways of a sanctuary. Responding directly to my query: "are tattoos graffiti for the soul?", as Niki Sullivan claimed (129), Lori indicated that the term graffiti does not accurately reflect her tattooing experiences because graffiti, in her interpretation, implies an act of defacing a wall or marking a space without consent, whereas, for Lori, tattooing is a voluntary practice of decorating her flesh in ways that are personally meaningful. Instead Lori professes that "my

tattoos are my carvings on the gateway” to the soul. In this sense, spiritually-inspired tattoos are clearly expressions of the soul’s need for manifestation, as Maureen Mercury posits (1). For this reason, I propose that the body is a sacred space and that spiritually-inspired tattoos are sacred texts that tattoo bearers utilize to simultaneously communicate their innermost values and beliefs as well as devices used for magical thinking, contemplation and meditation with the ultimate goal of manifesting some material effect, usually with regard to personal behaviour.

Spiritually-inspired tattoos, thus, are not merely a reflection of the bearer’s soul but are also an integral part of its creation, precisely because to shape one’s flesh with sacred text is to take an active role in creating one’s self. This point, I assert, is particularly evident with regard to tattoo bearers whose spiritually-inspired tattoos have emerged from what I understand as dark nights of the soul, or personal spiritual quests, and for those whom tattooing practices are intimately connected to acts of healing and transformation.

The truth about stories, as Thomas King eloquently states is “that that’s all we are” (122), and following that I conclude that for those of us with inked flesh the truths of what or, more precisely, *who* we are is scripted upon our skins.

As a final reflection, one concept that I wish I could have developed further in this thesis is that of the relationship between tattooing practices and the idea of impermanence. On that point. Since I have argued throughout this thesis that the body’s corporeality is mutable and in continual process, it stands to reason that neither tattoos nor the stories embedded within them are permanent, as it is broadly assumed. To be clear, I make this claim from both a theoretical and corporeal stance. In fact, my tattoo artist, Laura Casey of Lady Lo’s Custom Tattoos in St. John’s, NL made this point during my consultation with her in preparation for my second tattoo,

the one that reads: “I (th)ink, therefore I am.” Tattoos, she said “are not permanent,” thereby reminding me that ink along with the flesh within which it is embedded changes over time. Thus, tattoos are altered materially as the ink fades and the skin ages. In a like manner, as I have argued, conceptually speaking subjectivity is neither fixed nor univocal. As a result, tattooing narratives shift in relation to the bearer’s performances of selfhood.

What I find most interesting is that tattooing practices often affirm Buddhist concepts such as practicing mindfulness, which insist on the meditator being present in the moment, thus cultivating an awareness of the interconnectedness of mind, body and spirit. More specifically, the Buddhist practices of mindfulness, as Joseph J. Lynch contends, includes paying “attention to the breath, paying attention to bodily positions and activities, being aware of feelings and thoughts, and more” (240). Such practices, I suggest, are intended to manifest a shift in the practitioner’s reality, both perceived reality and material reality. In my own experience, such practices cultivate a greater awareness of my own embodied subjectivity. With that in mind, I suggest that further studies on tattooing practices might uncover interesting links between lived bodily experiences and impermanence as a theoretical construct.

In a like manner, another concept worthy of further study is the relationship between marking one’s flesh with spiritually-inspired tattoos and acts of prayer. Might tattooing practices align with tattoo bearers’ practices of prayer as the concept is understood across diverse spiritual approaches, I wonder? Similarly, as a Pagan and feminist woman, I would have liked to develop links between Paganism and feminism more thoroughly with regard to tattooing practices. Both of these motifs were raised by participants in this study; however, since my interviewing style was intended to create a casual atmosphere in order for tattoo bearers to share their personal

narratives in their own way and in their own voices I followed where participants led in terms of subject matter, which meant that I did not fully explore these specific themes.

Having said that, what participants' tattoo narratives make perfectly clear is that women in this study practice contemporary spirituality in deeply personal ways. And, in the process, many have abandoned "traditional" religiosity — including Christianity, which is the dominant religion practiced by family and friends in this geopolitical region and remains culturally influential.

In the end, I return to Gloria Anzaldúa's proposal that we are the shapers of our flesh as well as of our souls (125); and, importantly, I conclude that tattoos are personal mythologies — sacred stories — through which one actively takes part in the continual process of self-expression and self-creation. After all, a mark, as Sheila proclaims, can be quite powerful — if you let it be.

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Got Ink?

- *Are you a tattooed woman?
- *Are you over the age of 19?
- *Do you have ink that represents your ideas about spirituality?

If you answered yes to these questions I would love to talk to you!

Wanted: Master of Gender Studies Candidate seeks **8-10 women to participate in a study on women's tattoos**. Must be 19 years of age or older. Must have at least one tattoo that represents your current or past ideas about spirituality.

Must be willing to participate in an interview and be willing to have your tattoo(s) photographed for public display.

No cash award is offered for involvement in this study; however, participants will receive a 5x7 photograph of one of their tattoos (to be selected by the researcher).

Interested women are asked to contact: Gina Snooks, Department of Gender Studies; Memorial University of Newfoundland by email: gds372@mun.ca



The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as the way that you have been treated or your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

Appendix 2: Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

Title: Scripted Skins: Reading Women's Tattoos as Embodied Narratives

Researcher: Gina Snooks
Master of Gender Studies Candidate
Department of Gender Studies, Memorial University of Newfoundland
(709) 728-0826
gds372@mun.ca

Co-Supervisors: Dr. Sonja Boon
Assistant Professor
Department of Gender Studies, Memorial University of Newfoundland
709-864-2551
sboon@mun.ca

Dr. Jennifer Dyer
Department of Humanities, Memorial University of Newfoundland
709-864-3732
jdyer@mun.ca

Introduction: Tattoos tell stories. More to the point, tattoos tell stories about the inked person's thoughts, beliefs, experiences, feelings and their past; it is from this perspective that my research examines ways in which tattoos reveal women's life stories. Specifically, thinking about tattoos as social billboards I am interested in understanding ways that personal narratives surrounding tattoos are entangled with broader cultural, social and political discourses.

Purpose of Study: Broadly speaking, I am interested in what motivates women to have their skin permanently inked. More specifically, I am interested in the ways that tattoos communicate women's life stories. As such, the focus of my thesis is to examine ways that tattoos function as storyboards. More to the point, I question ways in which women's tattoos represent gendered experiences, particularly how tattoos might inadvertently or overtly represent or challenge normative ideas of gender performance. Finally, my thesis seeks to understand how tattoos might serve as platforms to engage with dialogues pertaining to cultural, social and political issues.

Anonymity: Should you wish to remain anonymous a pseudonym will be assigned to protect your identity. As such you will be referred to by this pseudonym for all public presentations of this research; including: publications. That said, given the visibility of tattoos and the fact that many are unique designs anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

Confidentiality: In compliance with the ethical guidelines of research governed by Memorial University of Newfoundland I aim to maintain confidentiality to the best of my ability throughout this research and in future publications. Thus, should you wish to remain anonymous, all correspondence that could potentially identify you as a research participant will be assigned a pseudonym. A list connecting your name to the pseudonym will be stored separately from all interview material and will be accessible to only myself. Further, all material pertaining to this research will be kept securely by the researcher for a minimum of five years, and will later be destroyed; including interview notes, audio recordings and photographs.

Potential Harms: Because tattoos are often made publicly visible and many are unique, one of a kind designs, complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed. As such, even with the use of pseudonyms it may be possible to identify you as a participant in this research based on what you say and how your tattoos are discussed.

Potential Benefits: Your participation in this research will guide the outcome of this study and will contribute to growing research regarding tattooed women in Canada. As such, your contribution adds to broader conversations about tattoo cultures. Particularly, this study aims to demystify narratives surrounding tattooed women. Furthermore, this study aims to further deconstruct stereotypes about the life stories, personal beliefs, life experiences and so forth of tattooed women, while simultaneously developing tattoo stories as platforms to address broader issues.

Time Commitment: Interviews will require approximately 60 minutes, while photographing tattoos will require an additional 30 minutes. It is possible that you will be asked to participate in follow-up questions via email and/or telephone.

Questions: Should you wish to clarify matters pertaining to your participation in this research or the project generally, you are welcome to contact Gina Snooks (researcher) gds372@mun.ca, Dr. Sonja Boon (co-supervisor) sboon@mun.ca or Jennifer Dyer (co-supervisor) jdyer@mun.ca

Consent:

Participant:

I, _____ (participant) allow Gina Snooks (researcher) to use the voluntarily given data described below for the purpose of research toward the completion of her Master of Gender Studies thesis for the Department of Gender Studies, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, NL Canada. Further, I consent to this data being used in public presentations and publications.

List of materials obtained from the participant (i.e. recordings, photographs, etc.)

- ☐ I have read the above information about the research.
- ☐ I have been given the opportunity to ask Gina Snooks questions about the research and am satisfied with the answers to all of my questions.
- ☐ I consent to participation in an individual interview.
- ☐ I consent to being audio recorded.
- ☐ I consent to being photographed for the purpose of this research.
- ☐ I consent to photographs of my tattoos being used in publications and/or public presentations of this research.
- ☐ I consent to photographs of my tattoos being used in publications and/or public presentations of this research with the following exceptions: _____

- ☐ I consent to the use of my name in publications and/or public presentations of this research.
- ☐ I wish to be identified by a pseudonym in any publications and/or public presentations of this research.
- ☐ I consent to the researcher using information gathered in this study in future research and/or publications.
- ☐ I understand that I may withdraw from this study at anytime, without having to provide a reason, and that in doing so will not affect me now or in the future.

Participant signature

Date

- ☐ I, Gina Snooks, have explained this study to the best of my ability. Further, I have invited questions and provided satisfactory answers. I have made clear ways in which the information gathered here may be used and am satisfied that the participant fully understands the study and any potential risks.

Researcher signature

Date

Appendix 3: Sample Interview Questions

Sample Interview Questions

1. How many tattoos do you have? Can you describe them, both the images and where they are located on your body.
2. What was your motivation for getting a tattoo?
3. Does your tattoo(s) mark any important dates or experiences in your life?
4. Does your tattoo(s) have symbolic meaning for you?
5. How do you think your tattoo(s) are perceived by others?
6. Do you think getting a tattoo has changed how you perceive your body? If so, can you explain?
7. How do you think society perceives women with tattoos and do you think that has changed over time?
8. If you have multiple tattoos is there one image that has greater significance than the others?
9. Does your tattoo(s) represent your spiritual views and, if so, how?
10. How do you define spirituality? And is there a specific terminology you would use to describe your spiritual worldview?
11. Are you a feminist? If so, do you have any tattoos that represent your feminism?
12. How would you define feminism?